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An evaluative study of a cross-cultural learning community

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Doing research on the cross-cultural learning community was one of the most eye-opening, exciting and enriching experiences in my life. I would like to thank the people who made it this way.

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...The opportunity to work together, to learn from each other, and to release the powers of human association.

Patrick Hill

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

"Get yourselves in groups," said Louisa, a guest speaker in the cross-cultural learning community seminar. "Each of the group gets a sheet of colored paper. After I count 'three,' you may start pulling the paper. Your task is to get as much paper as you can." Groups of four students started vigorously pulling the paper on the count of three. The battle was short, taking only a couple of seconds to divide the classroom into definite winners and definite losers. The winners were those few proudly holding most of the paper. The overwhelming majority, however, ended up with either nothing at all or with a tiny strip of paper they were still clutching in their fists.

The example above reflects deeply rooted societal assumptions about talent, relationships, and accomplishment: "that which is valuable is scarce; life is a win-lose proposition; and success is an individual achievement" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 22). However, institutions of higher learning are finally beginning to realize that they need to reverse these assumptions because such assumptions are overly simplistic in a world that is increasingly complex and diverse. The need to see the varied parts of this world as closely interrelated and interdependent is growing on both global and local levels. One example in world politics illustrates how these parts are interrelated globally. What at first appeared to be only an internal military conflict between Russia and its autonomous province of Chechnya now presents a nuclear threat to many neighboring countries, if not the whole

planet. Simply put, local confrontation and cooperation can have both local and global implications; understanding these implications can change student behavior. Thus, if the students in the cross-cultural learning community seminar had approached their task in a different manner, no one would have lost. Probably, even if the task had been phrased somewhat differently, without triggering such a fierce competition, the outcome could have been different.

Unfortunately, today's institutions of higher learning too frequently encourage competition and are organized in a way that discourages positive aspects of learning such as cooperation. This point is argued effectively by Patrick Hill (1985), the author of the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. Supporting Dewey, Hill stresses that "in our individualistic age we have forgotten about the powers of human association—what happens when you put people together—for example, the stimulation of thought, the exposure to diversity, the need to clarify one's own thinking in the community" (Hill, 1985, p.4). Further, most of the student development theories, which probably best mirror the values of the U.S. higher education, place a high value on individual autonomy and the achievement of self-reliance. For instance, King (1994) stresses that the focus of student development theories is on individual development almost to the total exclusion of attention to the development of community-oriented values such as altruism and interdependence. This focus has led to a certain set of assumptions and values related not only to education but also to the society as a whole. Higher education, which is critical in shaping societal values, should reconsider its existing approaches and practices that focus on individual values and competition. Academic

institutions should place more emphasis instead on teaching community values and collaborative skills.

Helping students develop their abilities to see the world in all its interdependence and interconnectedness is a big challenge. This ability involves a whole range of activities and experiences, which are seemingly obvious, albeit rarely practiced in everyday life. How can educators disagree with Patrick Hill who believes that by working together, learning from each other, and releasing the powers of human association, this challenge can be met?

A learning community, an example of how to address the challenge of seeing the world as an interdependent and interconnected unity, is the focus of this study. More specifically, the study focuses on a unique, perhaps for the whole country, type of learning community: a cross-cultural learning community.

Warrant for the Study

The following sections explain why studying learning communities in general and a cross-cultural learning community in particular is important. While learning communities in various forms have been part of American higher education for decades, only modest attention has been given to the benefits of general learning communities and virtually no attention has been given to cross-cultural learning communities.

Why study learning communities?

Throughout its history, American higher education, like educational systems in many other countries, has reinvented itself in response to social, political, and economic changes. One such recent reinvention is the learning community movement, rapidly growing in its popularity and scope. Following the leadership of North Seattle and Seattle Central

Community Colleges and the Evergreen State College (Smith, 1993), learning communities have been mushrooming on campuses devoted to students' learning. This relatively new concept, which places equal emphasis on both *learning* and *community,* illustrates the ideal education philosophy of the new millennium.

The need for learning communities has been stressed by a number of educators. Patrick Hill, for instance, in his speech at the Inaugural Conference on Learning Communities (1985) stressed that the learning community movement is

> a response to a whole complex of issues and the fundamental issues identified by the national reports.... It is not isolating one problem, nor is it a reform effort like the competency-based movement or intern-based education.... It is a vehicle for responding to a whole cluster of fundamental ills besetting higher education today. (p. 1)

Similarly, Patricia Cross (1998) sees the need for learning communities as three-fold: "*philosophical* (because learning communities fit into a changing philosophy of knowledge), *research based* (because learning communities fit with what research informs us about learning), and *pragmatic* (because learning communities work)" (p. 4).

In addressing these three needs, the learning community movement has a potential to enhance educational reforms in the United States. Learning community movement leaders such as Levine, Smith, Tinto, and Gardner (1999), the participants in a teleconference entitled "Learning About Learning Communities: Taking Student Learning Seriously," have identified recent efforts in educational reform:

- Moves from student-centered to learning-centered educational thrust
- Embraces disciplinary and multi-disciplinary perspectives
- Includes a variety of ways of constructing meaning

- Fosters a collaborative learning environment
- Increases emphasis on active and collaborative learning
- Incorporates rationally based and values-based knowledge
- Encourages civic and service components in educational agenda (p. 4).

These reforms become a reality in most learning communities. (The potential of learning communities is discussed in greater detail further on in Chapter 2.)

The need for this study also is determined by the call for assessment of learning communities and their activities. This call has been voiced by a number of researchers of learning communities (Angelo, 1997; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Levine et al., 1999; Tinto, 1994). At Iowa State University, where interest in learning communities began in 1995 and learning communities have been rapidly expanding from 32 teams in 1995 to 58 teams in fall 1998, the Learning Communities Working Group sees the continuous assessment of ISU learning communities' goals and objectives as imperative. (Learning Communities Working Group, LCWG, 1998).

In the assessment of learning communities, collaboration between academic and student affairs professionals is an important aspect. In their article *A missing link in assessment,* Trudy Banta and George Kuh (1998) call for the kind of collaboration, which, according to them is a "low-cost, high-payoff missing link in institutional improvement" (p. 46). By creating opportunities for dialogue between academic and student affairs professionals, this link provides a holistic view of student learning, develops a common language of learning and helps identify complementary practices and activities (Banta & Kuh, 1998).

To summarize, two reasons why studying learning communities is important can be identified. The first reason is related to the potential that learning communities have for implementing educational reforms and thus responding to societal needs in general. The second reason is determined by the need for assessment of learning communities, the assessment conducted collaboratively by students and academic affairs professionals and the assessment that yields results of equal importance for both parties.

But why study a cross-cultural learning community?

First, this type of learning community is innovative and unique. It is of great importance for further practice to know what factors and conditions make this learning experience effective and what factors do not.

Second, the lack of knowledge about various cultural groups of students and the ways their culture and values can influence their interaction with their peers and faculty members dictate the need for studying a cross-cultural learning community. As noted previously, the education system and philosophy adapt and evolve in response to social, political, and economic changes in this country and abroad. The following demographic figures of internationalization and globalization illustrate this point very well. Internationalization and globalization, tendencies towards the intensification of global relations of interaction and exchange, the world-wide interweaving of various fields of social communication, and the transnational harmonization of social models and structures (Schriewer, 1997) also pertain to such crucial areas of social interaction as education. In fact, education is very susceptible to the dynamics of increasing internationalization. In the past two decades, American colleges

and universities have witnessed a steady increase in international student enrollments (Institute of International Education, 2000).

Dates	International Students Studying in US
1979/80	286,343
1989/90	386,851
1998/99	490,933

Overall Percent of International Undergraduate Enrollment	Overall Percent of International Graduate Enrollment
2%	11%

The percentage of foreign students at some institutions is considerable. At Iowa State University, for instance, about 11% of the student population (2,674) are international students (Census of persons from other countries, Iowa State University, 1999). Colleges and universities seek diversity in their student bodies since a variety in students' backgrounds and interests enhances the learning environment. Among factors enhancing general education outcomes are the ones related to socializing with diverse students and institutional emphasis on diversity (Astin, 1993). How well does higher education know these new culturally diverse groups of students? To what extent does higher education draw on this knowledge? What the literature says on this subject does not inspire much optimism. Based largely on Euro-American students, most student development theories value and encourage individual autonomy and the achievement of self-reliance whereas some other cultures place a greater value on the well being of others and intragroup harmony. In fact, only the Western cultural tradition emphasizes the needs of the individual over the needs of the group (Jones, 1990).

The "rugged individualism" promoted in the Euro-American culture may be seen as selfish and inconsiderate by other cultures.

The gap in cultural awareness is glaring especially when it comes to teamwork. When discussing theories of collaboration, Bosley (1993) argues that there is a tendency to operate from the assumption that groups are homogeneous. This perspective is reinforced by Thiederman: "It is as if our culture is the way of life toward which everyone else is striving …[and] everybody's actions have the same meaning and arise from identical motivations" (1991, p. 20). Moreover, we often force individuals from different cultural backgrounds into the Euro-American model of the way people should behave in groups. We are disappointed, if not annoyed, if they, for a curious reason, do not fit the model. In this context, professionals working with students from various cultural backgrounds need to be more aware of and more sensitive to potential cultural differences.

A third reason for studying a cross-cultural learning community is because, similar to the rest of learning communities, cross-cultural learning communities have a great potential for contributing to reform in American higher education. Let us take, for instance, the reform that focuses on encouraging civic and service components in educational agenda (Levine et al., 1999). Being a good citizen is becoming extremely important in these times of an increasingly global world of interlinked economies and socioeconomic circumstances where everyone else's success or failure ultimately affects others. Examples are easy to identify: economic crises in Asia, problems in Eastern Europe characterized by disarray, inflation, instability, political disputes in all of the former Soviet Union countries, and the recent war in Yugoslavia. In this borderless world, simply removing concrete walls (as was the case with

Berlin's wall) does not guarantee success. Success requires more. It requires crossing cultural barriers. The best way to cross cultural barriers is not only to become familiar with the differences caused by barriers but also to acknowledge and respect those differences. In this context, the importance of effective communication across the borders is obvious. A cross-cultural learning community provides learning experiences that are conducive for better understanding and appreciation of cultures other than one's own.

Two reforms related to knowledge construction are yet another proof of how cross-cultural learning communities can enhance the process of reforming U.S. higher education. One of the reforms encourages a variety of ways to construct meaning (Levine et al., 1999). The philosophy of knowledge is changing. Brown (1994) defines it as a cognitive revolution (as cited in King, 1996); Barr and Tagg (1995) see it as a paradigm shift. This shift has changed many beliefs about learning and knowledge. One of them is the belief that knowledge is constructed socially rather than discovered. The primary purpose of most colleges and universities now becomes to produce or construct learning rather than to provide instruction. Quite logically, the exposure to different cross-cultural perspectives in this type of learning community ensures a variety of ways of constructing meaning and knowledge.

The second reform focuses on "incorporating rationally based and values-based knowledge" (Levine et al., 1999, p. 4). Education has tended to incorporate only rationally based knowledge, as it was, and still sometimes is, perceived as more "scientific." This approach strips knowledge as well as learning from their context. A cross-cultural learning community can add values-based knowledge to the equation, as culture is about values. Unfortunately, each culture tends to teach values as if they were the only ones worth

learning, with others being seen as less important or perhaps even inferior. What is worse, however, cultures do not teach tolerance to values of other cultures. A thoughtfully designed cross-cultural learning community can teach not only tolerance but also respect of values other than those praised in one's culture. Moreover, a cross-cultural learning community can influence the formation of attitudes positively. Attitudes also are learned within and are determined by a cultural context. The existing research on learning communities suggests the most consistent positive findings around attitudinal and affective change in students (Cross, 1998). It will be interesting to determine the extent to which the change occurs in the cross-cultural community under study.

Definitions

The definitions of learning communities vary widely. In fact, "the very nature of learning communities–adaptability and flexibility–makes an ultimate definition an elusive goal" (Levine, 1999, viii). Although definitions and models of learning communities are discussed in full detail in the literature review section, here the reader is provided with only basic definitions. The following definition is one of the most encompassing:

> In their most basic form, learning communities are a kind of registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team.... Clearly there is no one type of learning community.... But nearly all ...have two things in common. One is *shared learning*. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately and in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. The other is *connected learning.* By organizing the shared courses around a theme or single large subject, learning communities seek to construct a coherent first year educational experience that is not

> just an unconnected array of courses in, say, composition, calculus, modern history, Spanish, and geology. (Tinto, 1996, p. 4)

Tinto's colleagues and participants in a teleconference on learning communities define the concept of learning community as

> ...a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit and learning experiences to foster more explicit intellectual connections between students, between students and their faculty, and between disciplines. (Levine et al., 1999, p. 5)

These definitions are instantiated at Iowa State University in several ways: learning communities are structured by discipline or by the area of intellectual interest; many are subdivided into learning teams sharing the same class schedule and/or living assignment (LCWG, 1998). The members of the Learning Communities Working Group use Cross' (1998) definition stating that ISU learning communities are "groups engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning" (p.4).

Another somewhat different approach to defining learning communities should be mentioned here. In international circles the term "learning communities" is used to describe linking people from different countries (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Given that the cross-cultural learning community is one of those "known thinly" areas (Peshkin, 1993, p. 23), Lenning and Ebbers' approach is very helpful in defining a *cross-cultural* learning community. For the purposes of this study, a cross-cultural learning community is defined as one linking people from different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of learning together, learning about each other's culture, and learning about one's own culture.

The Study: Its Purpose and Research Questions

The cross-cultural learning community in this study was coordinated by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) and the International Education Services Office. It was formally called Learning Community Cross-Cultural Team #171. For purposes of simplicity, here it was referred to as the cross-cultural learning community (CCLC).

This learning community was residential; that is, the CCLC students not only took courses together but also lived together on the same floor of their residence hall. The students took three courses together:

- Anthropology 201, Introduction to Cultural Anthropology
- English 104, First-Year Composition I, required of all freshmen, so the CCLC was open to freshmen in all undergraduate colleges
- LAS 130x, Cross-Cultural Learning Community Seminar, an experimental course developed specifically for this group that linked courses

Besides taking three classes together, the students could benefit from peer mentoring and social activities.

While the researcher was denied an entry to Anthropology 201 by the instructor of that course, both the instructor of this section of English 104 and the director of the undergraduate English program gave their permission for conducting the classroom research in the hope that the findings would be useful in planning cross-cultural English 104 for the next year. Similarly, the coordinators of this learning community gave permission to observe their seminar and conduct focus groups with the learning community members. The

coordinators of this learning community expressed interest in the study because its findings can improve their innovative program.

The CCLC consisted of 26 students. The cross-cultural section of English 104 included 21 students: 12 American students and 9 international. The sample is described in more detail in the methods section of this thesis.

The learning community coordinators defined the goals for this CCLC as follows:

- To increase understanding and appreciation of human differences
- To continue to develop interpersonal skills and communication/writing skills
- To develop teamwork skills
- To make progress toward a positive transition to the university
- To identify and understand learning styles
- To increase awareness of international opportunities at Iowa State

(Fall 1999 Learning Communities Course Guide).

These goals were the starting place for developing research questions for this study. The first problem in producing workable research questions is "the distinguishing between the purpose and the research question" (LeCompe & Preissle, 1993, p. 37). The purpose of the study was to evaluate whether this specific cross-cultural learning community at Iowa State achieved its goals. Answering the following questions was helpful in achieving the above purpose.

- What role did the learning community play in the students' transition to university life?
- Did the CCLC enhance cross-cultural awareness and understanding?

Subquestions:

- Did participation in the cross-cultural learning community change students' perceptions about other cultures and their own culture? If yes, in what ways?
- What impact did the CCLC have on students' perceptions related to the following continuums:
  - Difference—sameness/similarity
  - Cooperation—individualism
  - Dualism—relativism

- How did the students perceive this learning community experience in general?

  Subquestion:

  - In what ways was the learning community what they expected and in what ways it was not?

These three general research questions about the innovative cross-cultural learning community at Iowa State University can be defined as evaluative, one of the four research outcomes—description, interpretation, verification, and evaluation (p. 23)—identified by Alan Peshkin (1993). Therefore, all the questions Peshkin posed—*Have they* [innovative practices] *been implemented? With what impact? What has the process been like? How do they* [practices] *work? For whom do they work? Are there exceptions*—were very relevant to this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, as indicated previously, the cross-cultural learning community was new: the study was conducted in the second year of the learning community's existence. The learning community, therefore, was not fully developed. The

second limitation was related to the generalizability of the findings. Because this was a case study, the findings are not generalizable to other settings. As a result of purposeful sampling techniques, the sample did not represent cultural groups other than those of the students who participated in this study. Yet, "since naturalists do not sample with representativeness in mind, they may be hard put to meet such a criterion, and they may feel (rightly) that it is not an appropriate requirement to lay on them" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 313-314).

Thesis Organization

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 is a general introduction providing the rationale for the study, its purpose, and research questions. In Chapter 2, the sources that serve as the theoretical foundation for the study are discussed. Chapter 3 focuses on the methods, data collection and analysis techniques used in conducting the study. Here reasons for the chosen methodologies and strategies are explained. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data obtained. The final Chapter 5 summarizes the study, presents general conclusions and contains implications for practice and suggestions for research in learning communities in general and cross-cultural learning communities in particular. The study has two appendix: Appendix A contains the interview protocol used during the focus groups.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The nature of the research project determined the approach to the literature review. This study focuses on a cross-cultural learning community, a customized learning community. With learning communities being a widely discussed topic in higher education, a great number of relevant sources are available today. The literature discussing cross-cultural learning communities, however, is virtually non-existent. Conversely, the literature on cross-cultural education and cross-cultural understanding is abundant.

Broadly speaking, the literature review is divided into two major sections. The first section consists of literature about learning communities in general. The second section of literature review concentrates on cross-cultural education and its importance for cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

More specifically, in this chapter the reader is first provided with a general concept of learning community. The historical background and more recent social impetuses for learning communities are discussed. After defining and describing models of learning communities, the research findings on students' benefits from this type of experience are summarized.

Further, the author reviews the relevant sources on cross-cultural education. Against this context the potential of a cross-cultural learning community as an effective vehicle of cross-cultural education is discussed.

Learning Communities

In this section, learning communities are first discussed in both historical and current social contexts. This discussion explains the need for learning communities in higher

education as well as society. Further, learning communities are defined and some of their models are described to illustrate the variety of learning communities. Most important, students' benefits from the involvement in learning communities are summarized.

Historical "roots" of learning communities

Learning communities are frequently discussed in higher education nowadays. Yet, the concept is not new. It is most frequently associated with John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn (1920s), and Joseph Tussman (1960s). Our understanding of today's concept of learning communities would be incomplete without knowing about the contributions of these educators. While tracing the roots of the learning community movement, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990), and Goodsell-Love (1999) discuss those contributions. For instance, active learning approaches such as student-centered and experientially based approaches are perceived to be one of Dewey's major contributions (Goodsell-Love, 1999). His other contributions are asserting that overcoming "ever-competitive individualism with interactive cooperation" is a task of educational community (as cited in Goodsell-Love, 1999) and viewing learning as a social process (Goodsell-Love, 1999).

Further, Alexander Meiklejohn, the early proponent of clustering courses, believed that education should develop in students the ability to think about real world demands and issues, which in its turn would prepare them for participation in a democracy. He, therefore, wanted students to discuss issues rather than take discrete courses. Meiklejohn's major contribution was stressing the connection between school learning and what Goodsell-Love (1999) calls "real world experiences."

"Taken together, the curricular and structural reforms of Meiklejohn and the teaching and learning innovations of Dewey provide a solid basis for learning community growth" (Goodsell-Love, 1999, p. 5). Tussman's "Experiment at Berkley" whereby a cohort of students took a certain set of courses that were team-taught by a group of faculty (Goodsell-Love, 1999) still provides valuable insights for learning communities coordinators today.

Social context for learning communities: atomism in learning—atomism in society

The rich legacy left by the above-mentioned educators waited for the time when it could be effectively utilized and built upon. In 1971, Evergreen State College in Washington took up the work of Tussman and Meiklejohn and created the model learning community they still hold to (Bystrom, 1997). The faculty at Evergreen were most influenced by the

> pedagogical innovation which [Tussman and Meiklejohn] introduced in order to achieve their curricular objectives: substituting from the traditional format of separate teachers, teaching separate courses, in separate blocks of time, to separate students (who are separately combining different assortments of courses), a format in which a team of teachers teach the same group of students, who are all studying the same things at the same time, over a prolonged period. (Jones, 1981, p. 22)

Learning communities came as a response to a wide range of problems in both education and in the society in general. In the field of education, the major issues learning communities are expected to address are, in Patrick Hill's words, the "atomization of the curriculum" and "privatization of academic experience" (1985). Almost at the same time as the innovations at Evergreen, Patrick Hill pioneered learning communities at SUNY Stony Brook. To illustrate the pressing need for restructuring the curriculum, Hill used a telling example of atomistic learning. One of his students was taking courses in behaviorism and existentialism, which lie on the opposite sides of the continuum explaining the nature human

being, back to back. When asked what she personally thought about the nature of human beings and which of the classes was correct, all she was able to say was which instructor she liked better and that she was getting an A in both of the classes. These two facts apparently mattered more than her ability to think about how these two opposite perspectives were connected and how she personally related to the two perspectives. Hill's example unfortunately is not a single example of disconnected and atomistic learning. The list of examples like this can be extended with Charles Schroeder's (1993) colleague's comment about his students. Schroeder's colleague likened his students to chipmunks or squirrels who were "storing away separate little chunks of knowledge: they had no idea why they gathered these nuggets and no understanding of how they related to each other" (p. 22).

On a broader scale, with the help of learning communities we can start seeing ourselves more connected to the rest of the world. As Patrick Hill (1985) remarked, we have been "living in too isolated and atomistic a fashion" (p. 4). The learning community movement sweeping across the country is a movement towards the renewal of community not only in education but also in the society in general.

In this vein, Patricia Cross (1998) illustrates the pragmatic rationale for learning communities by two mission-oriented tasks that may be enhanced by learning communities. The two tasks "training people effectively for the workplace and educating them for good citizenship" (p. 10) are the tasks almost every institution of higher learning seeks to accomplish. Further, Cross (1998) suggests that "the strands of developing human talent through education and using it productively in the workplace are coming together. Perhaps

they are also coming together in learning communities more than they are in most other pedagogies" (p. 10).

While bridging academic and social worlds, the concept of learning communities also reflects changes occurring behind the walls of academic institutions and therefore makes the education system more responsive to the changes and challenges of the society. Table 1 illustrates the changes learning communities bring into the traditional classroom.

Table 1.

Traditional versus Learning Community Classroom

	Traditional classroom	**Learning community classroom**
Meaning	individually constructed	socially constructed, through collaborative learning
Learning environment	competitive	cooperative
Nature of knowledge	stresses objective, rationalizes value of knowledge	admits subjective and value-laden nature neutrality of knowledge
Knowing	emphasizes "procedural" and "separate" knowing	encourages "connected" and "constructed" knowing
Learning	around disconnected disciplines	interdisciplinary foci
Change *happens through*	individual action	collaboration
Leadership	hierarchical	collaborative

Adapted from "Creating Learning Communities," by B. L. Smith, 1993, Liberal Education, 79 (4), p. 34.

These changes in perceptions of learning, knowing, leadership and agencies of change are dictated by changes in the society. Let us take workplace environment, for instance. Today's workplace—characterized by "intense international competition, the demands for more varied and customized products, and faster product cycles—all accompanied by increasing instability and uncertainty" (Cross, 1998, p. 10)—requires a new type of employees. Today, employees increasingly are expected to deal effectively with uncertainty and ambiguity while operating independently of supervision but interdependently with each other. Similarly, the very philosophy of the workplace is changing—to see organizations as sites for learning. Peter Senge (1990), the author of a cutting-edge book about the revolution in the workplace, calls for a shift of mind. The shift implies moving "from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience" (p. 12). Senge continues, "A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create reality. And how they can change it" (p. 13). In other words, we create knowledge that lies within human interchange, be it among humans with the same cultural background or with different ones. The following paradigmatic shifts occurring in higher education today—from teaching to learning, from passive acquisition of information to the social construction of knowledge, from holistic and connected to atomistic and separate approaches, from individualistic to cooperative culture—are very important in fostering this type of learning organization where everyone feels connected, and where everyone learns from another.

From teaching to learning

A number of authors stress the paradigm shift from teaching to learning in higher education in the United States: Angelo (1997), Barr and Tagg (1995), Smith and Waller (1997) to name a few.

Barr and Tagg (1995) provide a substantial comparison of the instruction paradigm and the learning paradigm. Unlike the instruction paradigm, "the learning paradigm frames learning holistically, recognizing that the chief agent in the process is the learner" (p. 21). According to their learning theory, "students must be active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge"(p. 21). Table 2, although reflecting Table 1 to a certain extent, provides a deeper understanding of characteristics of the new paradigm of learning and knowledge.

In Tables 1 and 2, the shifts toward actively creating knowledge and thus learning illustrate Barr and Tagg's (1995) concept of "education for understanding," which involves "the mastery of functional, knowledge-based intellectual frameworks rather than the short-term retention of fractionated, contextual cues" (p. 22). "Education for understanding" is critical in a transition from the information age to the knowledge age. In the knowledge age new epistemologies of knowledge prevail. According to these epistemologies, knowledge is socially constructed rather than passively acquired.

From passive acquisition of information to the social construction of knowledge

As teaching becomes less about simply conveying information and conveying, storing, and analyzing knowledge, it becomes more about providing students with an opportunity to make, share, and evaluate their knowledge (Bystrom, 1997). In this manner,

Table 2.

Instruction versus Learning Paradigm

	Instruction Paradigm	**Learning Paradigm**
Knowledge	transferred from faculty to students	jointly constructed by students and faculty
Role of students	passive vessel to be filled with instructors' knowledge	active constructor, discoverer, transformer of knowledge
Role of faculty	classify and sort students	develop students' competencies and talents
Mode of learning	memorizing	relating
Student goals	complete requirements, achieve certification within a discipline	focus on continual lifelong learning within a broader system
Context	competitive/individualistic	cooperation and collaboration among students as well as among faculty
Climate	conformity/cultural uniformity	diversity and personal esteem/cultural diversity and commonality
Power	faculty holds and exercises power, authority, and control	power is shared among students and between students and faculty
Ways of knowing	logico-scientific	narrative
Epistemology	reductionist; facts and memorization	constructivist; inquiry and invention
Accents	drills and practice	problem solving; communication; collaboration; information access; expression

Adapted from "Afterword: New Paradigms for College Teaching," by K. A. Smith & A. A. Waller, 1997 in Wm. E. Campbell, & K. A. Smith (Eds.), New paradigms for college teaching, Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, p. 276

higher education moves away from the traditional structure that used to meet the demands of the old workplace characterized by high supervision and standardization, even in thinking, very well. Faculty are less frequently transmitters of information and more frequently designers of learning environments and experiences as a way of responding to the changes in

today's workplace where employers gravitate towards coaching, expert guiding, and negotiating decisions with their employees. In this manner, higher education starts operating from a different set of epistemological beliefs. One of these beliefs, according to Kenneth Bruffee (1995), is that "We construct and maintain knowledge not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers" (p. 9).

In higher education, Bruffee (1995) suggests that teachers should help "students negotiate among themselves to resolve differences of opinion and judgement, help them understand why such differences occur, and help them find information and gain experience that will enhance the quality of judgement finally arrived at" (p. 147). What Bruffee says about knowledge construction can be supported well with what students themselves think about this epistemological shift. For instance, one of Valerie Bystrom's (1997) students at Seattle Central Community College said:

> Up until this program, I've been used to getting the answers from the teachers and things on the board. You know, take good notes, pay good attention to what's in front of you. ...But in this class I've heard some *brilliant* things from other students. I've come to most of my insights through other people. I've really had to look at the way I've been listening to people, and my prejudices in shutting other people's ideas down, and of thinking that I know where the answers spring from. (p. 263)

Further, as Bruffee (1995) stresses, "knowledge is not universal and absolute. It is local and historically changing; it is contingent. We construct it and reconstruct it, time after time, and build it up in layers" (p. 222). This perception of knowledge echoes with a shift "from a culture of largely unexamined assumptions to a culture of inquiry and evidence" (Angelo, 1997, p. 5). To cultivate this new culture, new approaches to creating learning and knowing are necessary.

From atomistic and separate to holistic and connected approach

One of the new approaches is seeing learning and knowing as holistic processes. In learning communities, students are encouraged to see the world holistically in all its interconnectedness and interrelatedness. One of the shifts illustrated in Table 2 is the move from learning built around independent and disconnected disciplines to the learning having interdisciplinary foci. For Bystrom and her colleagues from Seattle Central Community College, a learning community is "a structure that addresses the issue of curricular coherence by purposeful links among courses in different disciplines" (Bystrom, 1997, p. 247). The idea of linking courses lends itself particularly well to teaching students to make connections and see the world holistically. For instance, looking at the same problem from linguistic and anthropological perspectives not only gives students a deeper understanding of the problem, but also shows students that they can approach the same problem in many ways.

The number of colleges offering this type of learning experience, well over 100 (Bystrom, 1997), suggests that connecting disciplines this way is working. The following quote from another one of Bystrom's students tellingly illustrates the power of the idea of integrating courses:

> The integrated studies model … is an extraordinary, powerful, and valuable medium. It was in the context of this model that I began to learn new ways of thinking, rather than simply collecting quanta of information…. This is the first place I got *education* at all: where I had the opportunity to integrate bits and chunks of information I was collecting and to synthesize them into a new understanding of the world I live in, of myself, and of my role as a member of society. It's like the difference between collecting a pile of bricks and building a house. (1997, p. 263)

From individualistic to cooperative culture

As the process of learning or, in that student's words, "building a house" becomes more socially oriented, education needs to move from individualistic to cooperative culture. Tables 1 and 2 also reflect this shift, which is, Angelo (1997) argues, part of "developing a more cooperative academic culture is vital for our very survival" (p. 4). With cooperation and community as the leitmotifs of his article, he describes the shifts and levers necessary for transforming the whole campus into a learning community. The following two shifts or levers illustrate Angelo's idea (1997) of cooperation and community:

- From a culture of implicitly held individual hopes, preferences, and beliefs to a culture of explicit, broadly shared goals, criteria, and standards
- From a culture that emphasizes and privileges individual struggle for private advantage to one that encourages collaboration for the common good and individual advancement (p. 5-6)

As Angelo's (1997) article emphasizes the need to bridge education and "real world," the majority of the shifts he sees education needing to make reflect changes in the workplace. One of them is a move to a more cooperative and collaborative culture. Angelo notes, for instance, "Just as employers consistently tell us that our graduates need well-developed teamwork skills to thrive in the workplace, faculty need to develop similar skills in order to prepare our students well" (p. 4).

The campus as learning organization

Angelo (1997) also discusses the ways in which the long-held aspiration for many educators to have a campuswide learning community can be fulfilled. The campuswide learning community is a community of learners where not just students collaborate and learn from each other but also faculty learn with their students. On some campuses the hunger for

this kind of community has been satisfied. Here is what one of Bystrom's students tells about this experience:

> Instead of having teachers just tell me what I should know, they were learning with us, being exposed to subjects from different perspectives. ... It wasn't such a power structure anymore, but a learning environment, humanized, where everyone was learning. I learned that I have knowledge, that I have what it takes to pursue knowledge, to gain knowledge. I left coordinated studies with the sense that I was free to learn rather than forced to learn. (1997, pp. 263-264)

Learning communities can make the world smaller, more connected for students; the connections they see in the classroom are the connections they will be expected to see and make in the community and workplace after leaving school. Terenzini and Pascarella, in their "Living with myth: Undergraduate education in America" (1994), saw one of those connections as a major challenge posed for reformers of undergraduate education:

> Organizationally and operationally, we have lost sight of the forest. If undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and student affairs administrators, must devise ways to deliver undergraduate education that are as comprehensive and integrated as the ways that students actually learn. A whole new mindset is needed to capitalize on the interrelatedness of the in- and out-of-class influences on student learning and the functional interconnectedness of academic and student affairs divisions (p. 32).

Partnerships between academic and student affairs are very important in reforming undergraduate education by bridging students' cognitive and affective development and fostering a "seamless" learning environment (Banta & Kuh, 1998; Schroeder, Minor, & Tarkow, 1999). In this light, learning communities are

> ...characterized by associational groups of students and teachers, sharing common values and a common understanding of purpose, interacting within a context of curricular and co-curricular structures and functions that link traditional disciplines and co-curricular experiences in the vital pursuits of shared inquiry.
> (Schroeder & Hurst, 1996, p. 178)

The shared inquiry is important not only when it occurs among students but also among faculty members and between faculty members and student affairs professionals. Observing how academic and student affairs collaborate and learn from each other is a valuable experience for students as it models ideal relationships in which students are expected to engage both while at school and in their future careers. These collaborative partnerships are essential in fostering a learning organization where everyone learns from each other.

Learning communities: approaches and definitions

By introducing the concept of the learning organization, Senge created a new synergy in a number of institutions of higher learning across the country (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). This synergy spurned a wide range of learning communities on the nation's campuses. Many variations have evolved to meet the unique needs of diverse student populations and the needs of various types of colleges and universities. Arriving at an all-inclusive definition, therefore, is rather challenging. Some definitions of learning community were provided in the first chapter. Building on that broad definition, Goodsell-Love (1999) sees the following as the most common understanding of the term *learning community*:

> [A learning community] center(s) on a vision of faculty and students- and sometimes administrators, staff and the larger community—working collaboratively toward shared, significant academic goals in environments in which competition, if not

> absent, is at least de-emphasized. In a learning community, both faculty and students have the opportunity and the responsibility to learn from and help teach each other. (as cited in Goodsell-Love, 1999)

The authors of the often-quoted Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty, and disciplines, approach the concept in the following way:

> Learning communities, as we define them, purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students.
>
> ...learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team-teaching, and interdisciplinary themes. (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 5)

Learning communities can be described in a variety of ways. Goodsell-Love and Tokuno (1999) suggest the following ways:

a. a common cohort of students taking the same classes
b. an interdisciplinary team of faculty teaching courses with a common theme
c. students forming study groups for their courses, spending time socializing outside class, and/or sharing strategies for success
d. collaborative class activities and assignments that require students to work together and intentionally practice skills such as communication, cooperation, and/or conflict resolution

A variety of approaches to the concept help other researchers aspiring to understand learning communities. For instance, Boyer's purposeful community, open community, just community, disciplined community, caring community and celebrative community served as a guide for Lenning and Ebbers (1999) in their understanding of learning communities in higher education.

Learning community models

Depending upon the targeted student population, institutional culture and support, learning communities can take a variety of shapes, even within institutions. Gabelnick and his colleagues (1990), Goodsell-Love and Tokuno (1999), and Lenning and Ebbers (1999) discuss this variety of learning community models. In 1990, Gabelnick and his colleagues proposed five models of learning communities: freshmen interest groups (FIGs), linked courses, course clusters, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies. In 1997, MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick regrouped them into three basic models:

- student cohorts in larger classes
- paired or clustered classes
- team-teaching designs

These three models are outlined in Goodsell-Love and Tokuno's (1999) *Learning Community Models* and described as "the foundation upon which customized learning communities are built" (p. 11).

Lenning and Ebbers' (1999) approach to types of learning communities helps to clarify the various ways the term is being used. Broadly speaking, they distinguish four categories: learning organizations, faculty learning communities, student learning communities, and virtual learning communities. With student learning communities being the most prevalent form, the authors describe in detail this type of learning community. Defined as "consciously and proactively structured student groups organized to promote student learning" (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 11), they are grouped into curricular learning

communities, classroom learning communities, residential learning communities and student-type learning communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 16).

Although there seems to be no consensus among authors on the ultimate definition of the learning community and its models, the flexible and adaptable nature of learning communities is their definite strength. This strength allows, in Goodsell-Love and Tokuno's (1999) words, "customizing " learning communities to the needs of the targeted group and institutional culture. The learning community investigated in this study is a good example of a "customized" learning community. It does not clearly fit any of the above-mentioned categories but combines characteristics of several of them. These characteristics as well as possible gains for students involved in the learning community are discussed further. For now we focus briefly on what learning communities in general have to offer students.

Students' benefits from learning communities

"If I were to be asked what structural and pedagogical innovation currently being developed in American higher education may hold the greatest promise for improving first-year student academic performance and retention, I can now argue that it may well be the learning community"(Gardner, 1999, p. v). What made John N. Gardner pay such high praise to the topic?

According to Patrick Hill (1985), "Learning communities are a vehicle for responding to a whole cluster of fundamental ills besetting higher education today" (p. 1). Indeed, effective learning communities have profound benefits for students in a number of ways. The extensive literature suggests that these benefits include the following:

- higher academic achievement and improved performance (Goodsell-Love, 1999; MacGregor, 1991; Tinto, 1997; Tokuno, 1993),
- better retention rates (Astin, 1993; MacGregor, 1991; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1994; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994; Tinto, 1997; Tokuno, 1993),
- greater satisfaction with college life (Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994),
- improved thinking (Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994)
- improved communication (Goodsell-Love, 1999)
- a greater ability to bridge the gap between the academic and social worlds (Angelo, 1997; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994).

Qualitative evidence on learning communities suggests that students find their teachers and peers more supportive, draw connections between their classes, and are more positive in general about the campus environment and their educational experiences (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994).

No matter how impressive the range of ills learning communities are expected to treat, they should not be seen as the panacea for all of educational woes. In fact, Adrianna Kezar (1999) in the Foreword to Lenning and Ebbers' (1999) The powerful potential of learning communities warns against making such a mistake. She says,

> Learning communities provide a more specific but extremely valuable benefit. What we know from the research on teaching and learning is that learning communities use the best principles of student development. If learning communities also help to address other problems such as diversity and disintegrating sense of community on campus, so much the better. But be wary of those who see them as a panacea;

learning communities alone will most likely not be the solution to these very complex problems. (p. x)

Transition to university life

Although not overestimating the potential of learning communities is important, one benefit of participation in a learning community cannot be overestimated. This benefit is easing student transition to university life. Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory, although typically considered to be an adult development theory, provides insights into factors related to successful transition and is very relevant to this study. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) defined a transition as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). For the freshmen students who are, for the most part the focus of the study, coming to Iowa State is a big event that has changed their relationships and routines. For the international students who also participated in the study this is even a more challenging transition. The latter experience transition not only to the academic culture but also to the culture in its broader sense.

Knowing what helps an individual in transition cope successfully is very important. Schlossberg and her colleagues (1995) identify four major factors influencing one's ability to cope with a transition. They are situation, self, support, and strategies. Self, support, and strategies are of particular relevance to the study. Schlossberg and her colleagues (1995) classify factors related to the self, for instance, into two categories: personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. The specific characteristics and resources that follow include only the ones the author considers pertinent to her study. Personal and demographic characteristics include socioeconomic status, gender, age, and one's cultural/ethnic background. These characteristics affect how a person views life.

Psychological resources include commitment and values, and outlook, especially optimism and self-efficacy. As far as support is concerned, Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) cite four types of social support: intimate relationships, family units, network of friends, and institutions and communities. Participation in a learning community is expected to provide the last three types of support.

In general, learning communities offer "a safe but challenging introduction to academic culture. The spirit of welcome, the high expectations, the collaborative work, and the sense of community help students persist" (Bystrom, 1997, p. 261). Determining to what extent participation in this learning community helps the students in their transition will be interesting.

Cross-cultural Education

This section discusses literature on cross-cultural education. What do we mean when we say "culture"? Why is cross-cultural education important? How can we train our mind cross-culturally? What skills and capacities are important in cross-cultural communication? Why active understanding of cultural differences is so important in effective cross-cultural communication? What does active understanding of culture and cultural differences involve? These are the questions the literature review attempts to answer in this section. Familiarity with the available research on cross-cultural education may considerably contribute to answering one of the research questions that deals with cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Meaning of culture

"Culture is a complex matrix of interacting elements'' (Porter & Samovar, 1997, p. 12). Because of its abstract, ubiquitous, multidimensional nature, not much consensus exists regarding the definition of culture. Even anthropologists do not agree on a single definition of the term. In fact, in 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified as many as 160 definitions of culture (Ferraro, 1994, p. 17). Today, even more definitions could be identified.

Out of the plethora of definitions, the following ones seem to be germane to the study. Downs (1971) defined culture as "a mental map which guides us in our relations to our surroundings and to other people" (quoted in Ferraro, 1994, p. 17). Ferraro (1994) approached culture in a somewhat similar manner, "Culture is everything that people have, think, and do as members of their society" (p. 17). The verbs *have, think* and *do* reflect what culture consists of. According to Ferraro (1994), culture has three major structural components:

1. material objects;
2. ideas, values and attitudes; and
3. normative patterns of behavior.

This study primarily deals with the second structural component: ideas, values and attitudes.

The most important element of Ferraro's definition is its emphasis on *members of their society,* which implies that culture is shared by its community members, and can not exist without its community. "There is, in other words, no such a thing as the culture of a hermit. If a solitary individual thinks or behaves in a certain way, that thought or action is idiosyncratic, not cultural" (Ferraro, 1994, p. 17).

Similar to these two definitions is the definition of culture as " a pattern of perceptions, values, attitudes, and behaviors that is accepted and expected by an identity group" (Singer, 1998, p. 99).

Another somewhat different approach to defining culture is of relevance here. Using a relatively recent view of culture, Milton Bennet (1998) defined culture in a broad and narrow sense, that is in terms of both international and domestic diversity. This definition is very appropriate, as there is a tendency to limit the concept of culture to the U.S. culture and consequently the concept of multiculturalism to a range of ethnic and cultural groups inhabiting this country only.

Since one of the foci of this study is cross-cultural education, the following six characteristics of culture identified by Richard Porter and Larry Samovar (1997) seem to be noteworthy:

- Culture is learned;
- Culture is transmissible;
- Culture is dynamic;
- Culture is selective;
- The facets of culture are interrelated; and
- Culture is ethnocentric

Some of the above characteristics enable us to learn about different cultures; for instance, the facts that culture is learned, not innate, and that culture can be transmitted or passed onto other individuals. Other characteristics that include ethnocentricity, dynamism, selectivity and interrelatedness make learning about different cultures important.

Call for cross-cultural education

An increasing number of leading educators point out that more emphasis should be placed on the affective and global aspects of education. For instance, Harris Wofford, former associate director of the Peace Corps and President of Bryn Mawr College, as early as in 1960, said: "The gap in understanding among nations and peoples, if not widening, is still enormous. The inadequacy of conventional academic education to close this gap—to prepare the people here and elsewhere for citizenship in the twentieth-century world community—is becoming obvious" (quoted in Sikema & Niyekawa, 1987, p. 4). Unfortunately, what was said about the gap in understanding among different peoples in 1960 still holds true today. A wide range of recent sources calls for cross-cultural education. Ferraro (1994), for instance, in his The Cultural Dimension of International Business emphasizes the ever increasing need for international competency, and defines it as a national problem. He, like Harris Wofford, attributes the poor international competency of students to its relatively low priority in U.S. educational institutions. Further, Milton Bennet's (1998) book on basic concepts of intercultural communication presents a compelling case for improving intercultural communication skills through education and training. Finally, offering a design for cross-cultural learning, Sikema and Niyekawa (1987) are convinced that any educational design should be "freed from the monocultural ethnocentric focus" (p.7). Moreover, it should "prepare students to function effectively in any culture or subculture and to help them grow toward becoming more flexible and creative through experiential learning" (p. 7-8). Their design encourages "learning to learn" attitudes as well as holistic and active understanding of cultural differences.

Training for cross-cultural mind

Casse (1981) contends that "by its own nature and structure, the mind is cross-cultural, meaning that it has the capacity to understand other people, comprehend the world in a meaningful way, and, even more, cope with its own internal dialectics" (n. p.). In his book, Casse invites us to explore our cross-cultural mind, which is the capacity few people are aware of.

The sooner one starts training the cross-cultural mind, the better. Ferraro (1994) refers to a study the UN conducted with 10 to 14-year-old students from nine different countries. The study found that U.S. students ranked next to last in their understanding of foreign culture. Some people may wonder why the UN should care about understanding of foreign cultures among students this early. According to Dean Barnlund (1997), "Cultural myopia persists not merely because of inertia and habit but chiefly because it is so difficult to overcome. People acquire personalities and cultures in childhood, long before they are capable of comprehending either of them" (p. 35).

Similarly, Angelo (1997) argues that standard practices in today's education often depend on highly questionable assumptions. For instance, he says, "Typical general education survey courses assume a "vaccination" model of learning, that a dose of Freshmen composition cures writing ills for the next three years" (p. 5). By adopting the similar "inoculation" model for training the cross-cultural mind, we can't expect that a dose of a weeklong cultural training right before going abroad or before interacting with internationals can cure cultural myopia for the rest of one's life. Developing a genuine, active understanding of cultures different than one's own takes more than one vaccination.

General cross-cultural communication skills

Effective cross-cultural communication takes numerous skills and capacities, which vary depending on cultures involved in the communication. While no course can cover them all, students should be aware of these skills in general terms. Ruben (1977) suggested that general cross-cultural skills include the following skills and capacities:

1. the capacity to communicate respect
2. the capacity to be nonjudgemental
3. the capacity to accept the relativity of one's own knowledge and perceptions
4. the capacity to display empathy
5. the capacity to be flexible
6. the capacity for turn-taking (letting everyone take turns in discussions)
7. tolerance for ambiguity (as cited in Hofstede, 1984, p. 278).

All of the above skills and capacities are evolutionary and developmental. Developing them is a laborious, complex, and time consuming process. The overarching goal of the process is developing active understanding of cultural differences.

Active understanding of cultural differences

Active versus passive understanding of cultural difference is critical in today's increasingly global and diversified world. Brought up by Mildred Sikema and Agnes Niyekawa (1987), the concept implies that *passive* understanding can be acquired at somebody's home through reading books or watching videos on different cultures. In fact, the authors are convinced that one of the reasons for the lack of cross-cultural awareness and understanding is that even well-educated individuals equate the *passive* understanding to actually knowing the culture.

In our increasingly shrinking world where cross-cultural encounters are not limited only to diplomats and tourists, *passive* understanding usually does not suffice. In increasingly frequent face-to-face interactions with one's foreign fellow student, colleague, business partner, neighbor or an in-law, *active* understanding is required. In their Design for Cross-cultural Learning, Sikema and Niyekawa (1987) argue that

> Active understanding requires the development at gut level of an attitude of acceptance, respect, and tolerance of cultural differences. This can be hardly accomplished through traditional classroom methods, because learning in the classroom takes place primarily at the intellectual level. Descriptions and analyses of other cultures and peoples may be presented, but the student does not experience the embarrassment of making mistakes or the joy of successfully functioning in another culture. (p. 4)

The growing literature on situated or practical cognition provides the answers to the questions about how to develop active understanding of cultural differences in students. According to Freedman and Adam (1996), the notion of "learning through doing" whereby "the individual learner … acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process" (p. 399) is very important. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) believe that "generally the enculturation into the practices of disciplinary communities is picked up in the local milieu of the culture rather than being explicitly taught" (p. 11). Actual involvement in a cross-cultural learning experience, therefore, can be considered one of the most effective ways of developing cultural sensitivity among students.

The assumption of heterogeneity

Sikema and Niyekawa (1987) stress that "at a time when international cooperation is essential for survival, learning to see people of other cultures as more similar to us than

different is essential" (p. 3). Although people need to be able to see commonalties between various cultures, differences should not be overlooked. In fact, Laray Barna (1997) considers the assumption of similarity as a stumbling block in cross-cultural communication. Barna also claims that people in the United States have a greater tendency to hold this assumption of similarity than those in other cultures (Japan, for example). In the introduction it was mentioned that most cultures, due to their ethnocentricity, tend to cultivate a belief that other cultures have identical behavior patterns.

Today we have plenty of evidence that we should operate from, in Fine's words (1991), the "assumption of difference" rather than the "assumption of homogeneity." This position is echoed by Bosley (1993), illustrating how instructors can help their students recognize this "assumption of difference" and prepare them to deal with cultural differences effectively.

Unlike the assumption of similarity that gives a foreign culture more predictability and thus reduces the threat of the unknown and ambiguous, an assumption of differences requires a willingness to accept the anxiety of "not knowing" (Barna, 1997). Without this willingness, one is likely to misread seeming cultural universals and approach a situation ethnocentrically. Without this willingness, one can not function effectively in the context of international cooperation that Sikema and Niyekawa discussed.

Relativist's versus universalist's approach to different cultures

Predictability and certainty also drive individuals who choose to use the "should-ism" approach to cross-cultural understanding. According to this approach, following a definite set of basic guidelines guarantees a 100% success in communication with people from all the

variety of cultural backgrounds (Casse, 1981). In reality, however, as Pierre Casse (1981) suggests, "The premise is very simple: in cross-cultural communication there is no rule with the exception of one: there is no rule. That's the rule" (p. 119). Similarly, no universals in cross-cultural behavior can be used as a basis for automatic understanding; each encounter should be treated as an individual case (Barna, 1997). Both Casse and Barna represent the relativist's perspective of culture. Unlike universalists who subscribe to the belief that individuals from different culture(s) behave or should behave the same way, relativists believe that cultural differences can be only understood within the context of that particular culture (Bosley, 1993).

Universalists tend to rely on cultural generalizations. Although sometimes important, cultural generalizations and overreliance on them should be avoided (Ferraro, 1994). Cultural overgeneralizing perpetuates stereotypes, both positive and negative. Because stereotypes have a potential of reducing the threat of unknown and insecurity related to ambiguity, they often become a reality. Barna (1997) considers stereotypes to be yet another stumbling block in cross-cultural understanding as they interfere with objective viewing of a culture and those who represent it. Readings, videos and discussions on cultural stereotypes and the ways people feel about stereotyping and being stereotyped help students acquire a relativist's perspective of cultural differences. Actually experiencing different cultures and extensive interactions with individuals representing these cultures are even more helpful in developing in students a relativistic approach toward culture.

Cross-cultural adjustment

The key element of effective cross-cultural communication is to experience the entire process of cross-cultural adjustment in its uniqueness and adjust to it accordingly. Casse (1981) defines cross-cultural adjustment as "a process which any individual (or group of individuals) has to experience to function effectively (but without alienation) in a setting that does not recognize all or parts of the assumptions and behavioral patterns that he or she takes for granted" (p. 90). To make the cross-cultural adjustment process work, the individual, according to Casse, should operate from two interconnected assumptions. The first assumption is *there is no absolute truth.*

A cross-cultural learning community has immense potential in terms of teaching students that there could be more than one truth, that truth is contextual and therefore not absolute. In a cross-cultural learning community, students get exposure to, in Michael Oakeshott's (1989) words, a "variety of distinct languages of understanding" (p. 39) or interpreting the truth.

> ...Each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in conversation—an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all. And perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus make our debut dans la vie humaine. (Oakeshott & Fuller, 1989, p. 39)

Dualistic versus relativistic thinking in cross-cultural communication

As noted earlier, to succeed in a cross-cultural adjustment one needs to choose the relativitist's approach over the universalist's approach to culture. When doing so, an individual progresses along William Perry's (1970) continuum of cognitive and ethical development. Perry's scheme consists of different developmental stages: dualism, multiplicity, contextual relativism and commitment within relativism. In the first stage, the truth is viewed as absolute, unquestioned, and in stark black-and-white terms. "Individual differences are not even acknowledged, let alone considered or appreciated"(Moore, 1994, p. 48). Although there is a tendency to believe that it is only freshmen and sophomore students who tend to think dualistically, adults when faced with foreign and unfamiliar are also likely to have this tendency. The reason for dualistic thinking is often little preparation for a cross-cultural encounter (Casse, 1981). Those with little or no exposure to things different than the ones they were used to and hence were comfortable with are not prepared to approach the foreign relativistically. Hence, the need for students to be exposed to different cultures, value systems and beliefs. This exposure moves students along the continuum toward a different way of seeing the world, the world as "essentially relativistic and context-bound with a few right/wrong exceptions" (Moore, 1994, p. 49).

Culture/transition shock

When moving along Perry's continuum, individuals often experience confrontation that is similar to culture shock. Culture shock is an intrinsic part of the cross-cultural adjustment process. Casse (1981) stresses, however, that there is no need to move to an

esoteric, foreign culture to experience it. Culture shock can occur anywhere. It occurs each time our values, beliefs, and assumptions are contradicted or confronted.

All of the CCLC participants are experiencing a culture shock to a certain extent. Of course, international students are experiencing it to a bigger extent than their American counterparts. However, for many U.S. students, coming to Iowa State to study is a kind of culture shock also. Moreover, for many U.S. students this CCLC is the first opportunity to interact with individuals from different cultures, which in a way presents a culture shock, too.

The concept of culture shock is very similar to Schlossberg's transition theory discussed earlier. The same factors helpful in transition can be applied to coping with a culture shock. Types of social support easing one's transition, a network of friends, and institutions and communities, are similarly useful for individuals experiencing a culture shock. Further, adopting a "learning to learn" attitude is what Schlossberg would consider as a good strategy for coping with a culture/transition shock. This attitude equips the learner with "a tool for adapting to change, to a world in which pluralism and the need to function effectively in different cultural environments will become increasingly important for an increasing number of people" (Sikema & Niyekawa, 1987, p. 11). The ability to adapt to different situations, environments and settings as well as a "learning to learn" attitude is the second assumption that ensures cross-cultural adjustment work according to Casse (1981).

Participation in the learning community should be beneficial to both international and American students because it eases their transition process to the new environment. In the future, students are bound to experience a culture shock when they join any new discourse community or organization with its own culture. Yet, as Casse (1981) emphasizes, "The new

employee does not understand that [he or she] is entering into a culture with its own structure, dynamics and value system. Moreover, very little has prepared him to approach or "decode" the new cultural environment in a systematic way" (p. 78). Similarly, new employees are often inadequately prepared to realize that they themselves are living products of their own culture. The majority of people are not aware of its impact. As Benedict states, "It is hard to be conscious of the eyes through which one looks" (quoted in Casse, 1981, p. 78)

Participation in the cross-cultural learning community should make students' transition to university more interesting and educational. This cross-cultural learning experience can not only make students aware of differences among various cultures but also make them more aware of their own culture. This awareness should help students see cultural differences as enriching rather than deficient.

Learning Community as a Bridge between Different Cultures

This section, while discussing how cultures differ along the continuums of individualism and collectivism, low-context and high-context, field independence and field sensitivity, topic centeredness and topic associatedness, and low tolerance and high tolerance for ambiguity, projects how the cross-cultural learning community can bridge these differences.

"Culture shock is a result of an encounter with another culture whose cognitive structure differs from ours" (Mestenhauser, Marty, & Steglitz, 1988, p. xiv). Part of active understanding of cultural differences is the ability to see those differences not as deficient but as the ones that have a potential for teaching and therefore enriching. Each culture has

something to offer to its counterparts. Rather than seeing cultures as two opposite sides of the spectrum, educators should encourage their students to bridge these opposites by learning positive elements of each of those opposites. The very concept of learning community has incredible potential to bridge the gaps between seemingly antagonistic cultures and build upon their cultural differences, be it in terms of their prevailing cognitive, communication or learning styles.

Individualistic versus collectivist culture

"The dimension of individualism-collectivism, as existing on a continuum of value tendency differences, can be used as a beginning point to understand some of the basic differences and similarities in individualistic-based or group based cultures" (Ting-Toomey, 1997, p. 392). Traditional Eastern and Western perspectives diverge significantly with respect to this dimension (Kim, 1997). Traditional Eastern perspective emphasizes the importance of the group identity, group conformity and group obligations. On the other hand, value tendencies of the Western perspective emphasize the importance of "I" identity over "we" identity and individual rights and needs over group needs (Kim, 1997; Storti, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 1997).

The emphasis on cultivating "autonomous self " and "connected self" (Ting-Toomey, 1997, p. 393) defines cultural orientation toward individualism or collectivism. Moreover, according to Markus and Kitayama (1991) the emphasis of "independent construal of self " or "interdependent construal of self" influences profoundly our communication with the rest of the world. They argue that the "interdependent construal of self" involves seeing oneself as "an agent, as a producer of one's actions. One is conscious of being in control over the

surrounding situation, and of the need to express one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (p. 246). Conversely, the "interdependent construal of self" implies

> Attentiveness and responsiveness to others that one either explicitly or implicitly assumes will be reciprocated by these others... One is conscious of where one belongs with respect to others and assumes a receptive stance toward these others, continually adjusting and accommodating to these others in many aspects of behavior. (p. 246)

The seemingly opposite strands discussed above clearly come together in the concept of learning community. Student agency in constructing knowledge promoted by learning communities is impossible without the independent self-concept Markus and Kitayama discuss. At the same time, however, seeing oneself as interdependent and connected is vital for revival of the community on campuses and in the society.

Low-context versus high-context culture

In addition, to individualism-collectivism, according to Edward Hall (1976, 1983), cultures can be divided into low-context and high-context. High-context cultures (Japanese, Arabs, Mediterranean people [Hall & Hall, 1989], majority of Slavs) enjoy extensive information, networks among family, friends, colleagues, and close personal relationships. Low-context cultures (North Americans and most peoples in Western and Northern Europe) tend to compartmentalize their personal relationships, their work, and other aspects of their life (Hall & Hall, 1989).

Storti (1999) goes further and defines high-context as indirect and low-context as direct cultures. He argues that individuals in indirect/high-context cultures "tend to infer, suggest, and imply rather than say things directly. ... These cultures tend to be more collectivistic, where harmony and saving face are the greatest goods; hence there is a natural

tendency toward indirectness and away from confrontation" (p. 91). Direct/low-context cultures, typically individualistic cultures, tend to revolve around "individual pride and esteem, individual ego-based emotions, and individual sense of autonomy and power" (Ting-Toomey, 1997, p. 394). As individuals in these cultures lead more independent and self-reliant lives, they have fewer shared experiences; hence, there is less context, less "instinctive understanding of others. People need to spell things out and be more explicit, to say exactly what they mean rather than merely suggest or imply" (Storti, 1999, p. 92).

Field independent versus field sensitive culture

Once again, "cultures differ in the manner in which they perceive their environment and the ideas they confront in that environment" (Stefani, 1997, p. 354). Some cultures place emphasis on the field (the whole concept) whereas others focus on parts of the field. This division between cultural perceptual differences reiterates the notion of holistic and atomistic thinking discussed earlier in this chapter. According to Gollnick and Chinn (1994), "Field-sensitive individuals have a more global perspective of their surroundings; they are more sensitive to the social field. Field-independent individuals tend to be more analytical and can more comfortably focus on impersonal, abstract aspects of stimuli in their environment" (p. 306). Low-context, individualistic, and highly industrialized societies are for the most part field-independent.

With the United States as an example of a field-independent culture, American students tend to have specific behaviors influenced by this type of culture. Some of those behaviors are positive; for instance, being task oriented and having the ability to work independently from the instructor. Others are less positive, and in fact, current educational

reforms, including first of all learning communities, seek to de-emphasize behaviors like competition, individualism and seeing parts of the field as independent from the rest of the field. On the other hand, students from high-context, collectivist, less industrialized and field-sensitive cultures prefer to work with others for a common goal and tend to rely considerably on the teacher's guidance. They perceive their surroundings more globally and as more connected to their personal experiences (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994). As can be seen, both field-independent and field-sensitive cultures possess valuable and positive aspects from which students can learn. Teachers, therefore, should be encouraged not only to function bicognitively themselves but also teach their students to operate bicognitively (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994).

Culture with topic-centered communication styles versus culture with topic-associating communication styles

Another cultural distinction related to the differences in perceptions of the field is the one that is based on approaching a topic. In cultures with the prevailing topic-centered communication style, students focus on a single topic or closely related topics and choose a linear fashion of presenting their topics (Au, 1993). Euro-American students tend to be topic-centered. In contrast, in cultures preferring topic-associating communication styles (e.g., African-American culture [Stefani, 1997], Ukrainian culture) students present "a series of episodes linked to some person or theme. These links are implicit in their account and are generally left unstated" (Au, 1993. p. 96). These implicit and unstated links make cultures with prevailing topic-associating communication styles high-context and vice-versa.

The linear impersonal fashion of topic-centered communication styles fits the description of separate, detached, and therefore scientific method that has dominated

education for so many years. In contrast, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) legitimized another way of knowing: more connected, more personal and more "process-oriented" rather than "goal-oriented." In Table 2: Instruction versus Learning Paradigm, the shift from logico-scientific ways of knowing to more narrative ways of knowing was also mentioned. As Kurt Lewin, the founder of social psychology, asserts, "All theory is really autobiography" (quoted in Smith & Waller, 1997, p. 274). The narrative way of knowing values context and personal experiences. Each individual experience is valued on its own. Without the move to a more narrative knowing, this study would not have been possible as this move brought value to qualitative data in addition to quantitative data.

Low tolerance versus high tolerance for ambiguity culture

Cultures can be divided into those tolerating contradictions, uncertainty, and ambiguity and those geared to structure and predictability. Since the North American culture tends to emphasize dichotomies: such as good/bad, correct/incorrect, right/wrong, it is considered to be a culture with a low tolerance for ambiguity (Stefani, 1997). Cultures with a high tolerance for ambiguity, India for instance, never regard truth in absolute terms (Samovar & Porter, 1995). Although Lisa Stefani (1997) claims that educators can help facilitate a smooth transition to the new structured and predictable environment, we should be careful here not to imply that less structured and predictable cultures are deficient. Less structure and predictability means more tolerance for ambiguity. In fact, Hofstede (1984) argues that people from lower uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to do better in cross-cultural contacts. At least three out of seven general cross-cultural skills and capacities suggested by Ruben (1977) are conceptually related to what Hofstede calls the uncertainty

avoidance index syndrome. They include the capacity to accept the relativity of one's own knowledge and perceptions, the capacity to be flexible and obviously tolerance for ambiguity. Developing tolerance for ambiguity and ability to see more than one "truth" among American students is on the agenda of the majority of progressive educators designing learning communities.

Finally, it can not be emphasized too greatly that no culture uses one or another approach or style exclusively: individualist/collectivist, low-/high-context, field-independent/field-sensitive, topic-centered/topic-associating communication style, low tolerance versus high tolerance for ambiguity culture. While most of the cultures tend to emphasize one way over another and awareness of these tendencies is helpful in a cross-cultural encounter, thinking that specific cultures fall into one of the above categories exclusively can lead to overgeneralizing and stereotyping. The negative impact of overgeneralizing and stereotyping was discussed earlier. Individuals within a given culture may be anywhere along the continuums discussed above. Once again, we should use "learning to learn attitudes" and see the culture in a holistic and relativistic manner.

Furthermore, the cultural differences that have been pointed out should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive dichotomies. Rather, those differences should be seen as complementary in our understanding of cross-cultural interactions in particular and human interactions in general. Earlier, the division into Eastern and Western cultures was discussed. Young Yun Kim (1997) advocates an integration of Eastern and Western cultural perspectives as a way of creating "intercultural personhood." According to him, the concept of intercultural personhood is "a way of life in which individuals develop an identity and

definition of self that integrates, rather than separates, humanity. Intercultural personhood projects a kind of human development that is open to growth—growth beyond the perimeters of one's own cultural upbringing" (p. 434).

This cross-cultural learning community has a unique potential to bridge concepts and ideas seemingly "unbridgeable," and thus to construct a rich environment in learning opportunities for its participants.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology the researcher employs and explains the rationale for it. The chapter also describes data sources, data collection and analysis methods, the researcher role, and the ways of establishing trustworthiness.

Qualitative Research Methodology: Rationale

The purpose and goals of the study have determined its methodological approach. Broadly speaking, the study seeks a humanistic understanding of the culture prevailing in this new learning community in all its richness, complexity and ambiguity (Bruner as cited in Peshkin, 1993, p. 28). More specifically, its goal is to describe how the participants perceive their learning experiences and construct their own meaning in this new for them culturally diverse learning environment. The qualitative research tradition is very appropriate for achieving this purpose as it entails a detailed description of situations, events, people, their interactions, observed behavior, and the use of direct quotations from people about their experiences and attitudes (Patton, 1990). Similarly, qualitative methodology provides "rich, descriptive data about the context, activities, and beliefs of participants in an educational setting" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p.17). In this study, qualitative methodology is employed to allow the participants of the cross-cultural learning community an opportunity to describe their experiences and attitudes in their own words as well as to enable the observer to provide a rich context for the students' descriptions.

Data Sources

In this study, the students in English 104 are the main data source. A purposeful sampling resulted in the sample make-up shown in Figure 1.

Data Collection

Observation

The major data collection method is participant observation of English 104. Observations were conducted twice each week for the entire fall 1999 semester. Additionally, the researcher observed the two-and-a-half-month learning community seminar where the students met once each week.

Document analysis

During the semester, the researcher periodically reviewed the English 104 instructor's materials that were given to the students: the syllabus and assignments' sheets, and handouts

Number of participants—19			
Learning community members—11		Non-learning community members—8	
U.S. students—6	International students—5	U.S. students—5	International students—3

Figure 1. Description of the sample.

Note: The CCLC class had 21 students. Of those, 19 gave their consent to participate in the study. The major focus of the study was placed on those 11 students who were learning community members, all of whom consented to participate.

the learning coordinators or guest speakers used in the seminar. Occasionally, the researcher also looked into some students' writing assignments.

Focus groups

As noted earlier, this study seeks a humanistic understanding of the cross-cultural learning community. Since this learning community is a microcosm of the larger student culture, it should be studied, according to Elizabeth Whitt (1996), from students' perspective.

For this purpose, the semester after the class, at the beginning of the spring 2000 semester, two focus groups were conducted with the learning community members. Conducting the focus groups after the students were out of the learning community enabled the participants to reflect on their experiences during the previous semester. The researcher met first with the international students and later with the U.S. students in their residence hall.

The interview format was semi-structured. The focus group interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Because of the emergent nature of qualitative research design, the analytic induction or constant comparison method was employed. The method implied collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously and allowed comparing the new data to the rest of it. The researcher also looked for themes, patterns and trends, especially when taking and processing field notes.

Researcher's Role

Auditing English 104 made the researcher's role one of an insider using Boostroom's (1994) classification (pp. 58-59). In English 104, the researcher occasionally participated in classroom discussions whereas in the Learning Community seminar she tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. In the latter class, the researcher was an observer, much like a video camera (Boostroom, 1994) recording what she observed happening in the field.

Establishing Trustworthiness/rigor

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Not all of them apply specifically to this study. For instance, due to the fact that it is a case study with a small sample size, the findings are not transferable. The researcher, however, was aspiring to provide a description thick enough to enable, in Lincoln and Guba's words, "someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (p. 316). The chosen sampling strategy helped to meet other criteria. As a way of purposeful sampling, it allowed the researcher to discover, understand and gain insight from the sample from which the most could be learned.

Prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and audit trail were other techniques that were employed to ensure credibility, dependability and confirmability.

Prolonged engagement

According to Maxwell (1996), qualitative research has two major validity threats . One of them was related to reactivity (p. 90). The researcher's taking a class with the

students while observing it helped to minimize the reactivity. Similarly, auditing English 104 and being around the students for the whole semester helped her build trust with the participants. By the time the focus group sessions were conducted, the participants got used to the researcher and started seeing her more as a class member than a researcher. Both American and international students felt quite comfortable talking to the interviewer and behaved and talked in a natural manner.

The prolonged engagement in this community, soaking in its culture for four months, ensured that trust and good rapport emerge. The observation of the learning community seminar and attending some of the planned out-of-class activities provided scope for the study whereas the persistent observation of English 104 class provided depth.

Triangulation

Triangulation, characterized by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as overlap methods, ensured not only *credibility* but also *dependability* (pp. 305-317). In the case of this study triangulation implied different data collection modes: regular participant observation of English 104, the observation of the learning community seminar, occasionally reviewing instructional materials and students' writing, and finally the focus groups.

Peer debriefing

The second major validity threat was the researcher's bias (Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, the focus group protocols were designed to avoid leading questions. Peer debriefing with another graduate student in higher education was very useful in establishing credibility. It not only probed the researcher's biases but also helped her to clarify her understanding and test her conclusions.

Member checking

Member checking, although it ensured credibility of the study, did not result in any major changes from what the researcher inferred from the students' comments. Member checking entailed the participants' reading a draft of Chapter 4 that presented the focus group results. What seemed as a potential problem at the beginning, having non-native speakers in the sample, turned out to be no problem. Out of three international students, only one student had some difficulty speaking fluent English. Yet, his comments—laconic and clear—were not misunderstood by the researcher.

Audit trail

One of the techniques for establishing confirmability is the audit trail. Customized to this study, the six audit trail categories developed by Edward Halpern (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 319-320) were as follows:

- *Raw data*, including written field notes and unobtrusive measures such as lists of students, syllabi, handouts and assignment sheets
- *Data reduction and analysis products,* including write-ups of field notes
- *Data reconstruction and synthesis products,* including findings, interpretations, conclusions, and a final report incorporating connections to the existing relevant research and interpretations
- *Process notes,* including notes related to procedures, design, strategies and rationale

- *Materials relating to intentions and dispositions,* including the research proposal, letters of permission, consent form, human subject forms and memos to the Human Subjects Committee
- *Instrument development information,* including focus group protocols

In summary, in order "to elucidate the experience that [was] implicated by the subjects in the context of their activities as they perform them, and as they [were] understood by [the observer]" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p.491), the researcher employed qualitative methodology. The methodology involved classroom observation, occasional document review, and two focus group sessions.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter analyzes the culture of the cross-cultural learning community (CCLC) from the perspective of its participants. While the students' voices prevail, the voice of the observer is also heard occasionally. The observer's voice complements the students' voices by situating them in a wider context.

Although the observation data are also included, this analysis is largely based on the two focus groups conducted in February 2000, shortly after the students began a new semester. The focus groups were conducted at an interval of two weeks. Each of the sessions lasted approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, before the sessions began the students were asked to suggest the pseudonyms they wanted to be called in the study. The names were to match their gender and country of origin. Similarly, Stekoula is not the real name of the instructor of English 104.

Participants

The researcher met with the CCLC international students first. This focus group consisted of three students: two males and one female, 60% of the international students in the CCLC. One of the male students, Juan, didn't live in the same residence hall with the rest of the learning community. The second focus group consisted of six U.S. students: four females and two males, 100% of the U.S. students in the CCLC. One of the male students, Conrad, lived in a fraternity. Juan and Conrad were included in the focus groups because the researcher expected them to provide a somewhat different perspective about this learning community, one from more of an outsider. In addition, their perspectives allowed the

researcher to make some comparisons between the residential and nonresidential learning community experiences.

Appendix X contains more detailed information on the participants' demographics: year in school and nationality/ethnicity. For confidentiality purposes, the appendix is not attached to the study. The researcher's major professor keeps a sealed copy of the appendix on file in his office.

Areas of the Discussion

The focus group questions were designed to help the investigator to answer the research questions: (a) What role did this learning community play in the students' transition to university life? (b) Did the cross-cultural learning community enhance cross-cultural awareness and understanding? If yes, in what ways? (c) How did the students perceive this learning community experience in general?

The vast majority of the questions were prompted by the researcher's observation of English 104 and the learning community seminar. The focus group protocols (Appendix A) consisted of six sections:

I. **Introduction.** The students were asked why they chose this cross-cultural learning community (CCLC), what their expectations were, and whether the learning community was what they expected.

II. **Students' perceptions of the role of the learning community in their transition to university life.** Questions about the students' experiences with transition, taking classes together and living with the same people were asked.

III. **Academics.** The students were asked if the participation in this learning community had any impact on their studies and, if so, in what ways. The

discussion was focussed on English 104, since that was the class the researcher observed for the whole semester.

IV. **Cross-cultural component of the learning community.** A range of questions about students' perceptions of this cross-cultural experience and individuals from other cultures was asked.

V. **Teamwork.** The students were asked to reflect on the dynamics of the team projects in English 104.

VI. **Concluding questions.** The students were asked if they felt they changed as a result of participation in this learning community, what benefits they gained from participating in this learning community, if they would join this learning community again, and if they would recommend it to other students.

Although the sections seem to be discrete, issues within some sections overlapped with issues in other sections. For instance, some issues discussed in the section on teamwork were of equal value to cross-cultural understanding since the team members were individuals from different countries. The overlap emerged during the focus group sessions. Very often, the participants did not follow the researcher's script. The study, of course, benefited from this natural flow of the discussions.

After the focus group sessions were transcribed, the following thematic categories emerged:

- students' reasons for joining the learning community and their expectations;
- the role of the learning community in their transition to the university;
- cross-cultural awareness and understanding;
- ways of improving the learning community; and

- changes and benefits the experience brought to its participants.

Similar to the sections of the focus group protocols, there is no one-to-one match between these thematic categories and the research questions. Instead, the categories can answer two or all three research questions. The last category, for instance, changes and benefits the experience brought to its participants, is equally relevant to the questions concerning the students' transition, cross-cultural understanding and general perceptions of the learning community. The final chapter discusses more explicitly how the research questions were answered.

While this analysis begins with the discussion of why students joined the learning community, the major part of this chapter is devoted to the discussion of whether student expectations were met, how they were met, and what could be different in this learning community.

Students' Reasons for Joining the Learning Community and Their Expectations

At the beginning of the focus group sessions, the students were asked why they decided to join the learning community and what they expected from it. The majority of students said they wanted to meet new people, make new friends, and learn about different cultures. Jennifer, for instance, said that she wanted to "learn about other cultures, not through books, [but] through actual life experiences." For Suzie, making international friends seemed to be appealing because she likes to travel and she "wanted to have somebody to go and, like, crash at their house."

Some U.S. students hoped that this experience would help them achieve some of their long-term goals.

- I have an interest in studying abroad and the career choice I made … I want maybe working abroad for the most of my life, so … I figured this was the easiest way to begin to learn about other cultures and get used to different cultures (Bob).
- I've been interested in anything international, so this was a good choice, and I wanna work abroad eventually (Anne).

The international students' expectations had a slightly different perspective: they hoped this experience would help them to make a transition not only to the university but also to a new country.

- I chose this learning community because I thought it would teach me about how Americans live, and in that way, I thought, I would be able get used to living here very quick (Yamikani).
- I thought I would be able to learn English faster…. I [wanted to] learn how life is here (Juan).
- I knew there would be many international students, so … [I knew] I'd be living with all of them together, so I wouldn't be, like, an odd behavior around [sic], and many of [us] would do things together…. [laughs] I also knew that I would be together with a group of Americans who would be willing to accept [me] because they also wanted to participate in this community with other international students, so it would be a two-way thing (Saifi).

In addition, both international and U.S. students expected to learn other people's culture through having a roommate from another country: the international students expected to live with American roommates and vice-versa.

As we can see, the students' expectations of and reasons for joining the learning community were centered on two broad aspects: their transition process and learning about different cultures. The following sections illustrate the ways the students' expectations were met and not met.

The Role of the Learning Community in Transition to University Life

The participants shared their perceptions of transition as well as related factors such as taking classes together, ways of helping, living on the same floor, having a peer mentor, and faculty and staff.

The students' perceptions of the transition

The U.S. and international students perceived the role of this experience in their transition differently. Highlights are reported in the next two sections of this chapter.

Transition for the U.S. students

For the U.S. students, participation in this cross-cultural learning community put their transition to college life in a different perspective. The overwhelming majority of them talked about how much easier their transition was compared to their international peers' experiences. The following comments illustrate this point:

- I think it [CCLC] gave me a better view of the transition.... Going into college ... a lot of my friends were, like, "oh my god, this is such ... a difficult transition: going from high school and being away from your family, and college, and stuff." But being on the floor ... and seeing friends of mine who are from halfway across the world, having to come 2000 some miles ... to a different country with a different culture and a different language, and then have to do all the same stuff that I was doing on the top of that, it really made me realize how easy it was for me and how good I had it making that transition (Bob).
- I was freaking out when I had to leave home. And then I got here and, you know, I had all this crying left home, and I, like, [saw] Yamikani come here and she didn't cry or anything, and she's so far away, she isn't going to see her family for two or three years. And then I was thinking, "What am I crying about? I have nothing to cry about." So that helps me (Jennifer).

- I'm a lot more thankful, like, now that I have seen some of the hardships that they have to go through because they can't see their family and that they're paying two dollars a minute to talk to their families. And we're lucky that we don't have that problem. I mean, we all live fairly close, and if there's any major problem or something, we can go home, and we can see our family whereas it wouldn't be that easy for those people to go home.... I'm 4 hours and 50 minutes away [from home], and it just doesn't seem that far now that I've been hearing that it takes some people 24 [hours] by plane to get home (Tasha).

Similarly, Suzie and Tasha talked about how much they appreciated their ability to go home for holidays:

- At Thanksgiving, that was the first time I'd gone home ... but then I came back and there were people that stayed here over the break and they are going to stay here over summer, and they are going to stay here until they graduate. And that helps me appreciate the fact that I can go home (Suzie).
- I think the worst thing has to be the holidays.... We're all going home and we're talking about the holidays a month beforehand. "Oh, we're going home for Christmas break! ... My Mom is going to cook a big Christmas dinner!"... And these guys are thinking, "Oh, gee, we're going to sit here, and we're going to eat [from the] Food Service for Christmas." And I think that made me feel very lucky for what I have (Tasha).

The participation in the learning community helped not only the U.S. students but also the international students.

Transition for the international students

The international students reported how this experience eased their transition. Saifi felt that the fact that the learning community introduced them to the way of living in the host culture was more significant than how it facilitated their transition to university life. Yamikani concurred by saying:

> The school was, like, so huge, so, it's like, I have to learn how Americans live to be able to survive in this school. If I was to live the way we live back home, it wasn't gonna work very well. So I had to learn things … because even greetings—back at home you greet everybody, even people you don't know at all. Here, it's like, everybody's independent. I had to learn that in the cross-cultural learning community, I learned that in the cross-cultural learning community.

Also, Yamikani said that she initially thought international students would live separately from American students, and she appreciated the opportunity that

> The students from different countries [were living] together and [that they could] kind of mix and get used to what's happening out. And, like, football, I had no clue what it was but the first time I was going to it with a group of people, that made it a bit easier because they have gone [before]…. [And I went with] my roommate who knows it already. But if I had gone with people who don't know it!

The U.S. students also felt this experience helped their international counterparts in their transition. The following comments attest to that:

- I think it was helping them … knowing that they were coming to a group where there are a lot of international students who will be having the same struggles, being homesick (Jennifer).
- They benefited by having a group set up that is specifically geared towards them, [that helped them] adapt to American culture, and [the group] who is going be very open minded and understanding about their way of life (Bob).

Among other things that were supposed to ease the students' transition was taking three classes together with the same student cohort. The students were asked to share their perceptions of the idea.

Taking classes together

The students' responses indicated that taking three classes with the same student cohort helped them both academically and socially. Suzie, for instance, felt that living on the same floor with the students who took the same classes and subsequently had similar schedules was very helpful.

> There were people that always knew, like, … at least in part, what we were experiencing because we had similar schedules. So when we had this exam, everybody knew that we had this exam. … Because there were so many of us taking classes together… when we had English paper due, it was really widely known that we have this paper due! And it's "oh my gosh," you know. Or with the anthropology exam, if you needed help studying or whatever there were people you could go and talk to. … So that was nice in part, anyway … because there were people that … understood what you were doing.

Conrad who lived in a fraternity provided a somewhat different insight. He said, "I probably wouldn't just walk through and knock on random doors and ask for help."

Several American students stressed the importance of the relationships they developed and friends they made through taking three classes together.

- I think it also adds motivation. I know this semester I haven't gone to a lot of my classes. Simply because … and, it's not like, my grades are dropping or anything. It's just that I have less motivation to go to classes because there is nobody in the classes that I went [with]. So, it's like, well … you know, I could stay home and get the notes from the Web, or I can read the book and get just as much out of it as I go to class. But last semester it was, like, "oh, I have a class with this person and this person." … Somebody would be, like, "hey, you wanna walk to the class together?" So there was always someone to walk over to class with, or somebody to talk to in class. There was more motivation to go [to classes] than there is this semester (Bob).

- I think it gave us a kind of a springboard. Even just, like, at the beginning of the first semester, when we were all here scared wherever we were going on campus. I mean, to have people to go to class with, to be there didn't seem as intimidating. I think it's just a nice environment: to look around and see 13 other faces that were there and you knew (Anne).
- In the learning community seminar, the coordinators would often wonder about the students who were not in the class. What surprised me was that those present in the class would almost always know the reason why their friends didn't come to a class. Although it was rather early in the semester, the students already developed strong friendships and cared about each other (the observer's diary, 9/29/1999).

Similarly, Juan felt that taking three classes together helped him make new friends he would not have been able to make otherwise because of the size of the classes he was taking:

> I think in other classes Americans are really difficult to make friends… Because one: there are so many people… and also because, I don't know, but in my case, in every class these are, like, different people, I never see the same guy, maybe once or twice in a week. It's really difficult to interact with the same guy. Also, they never say "hello" or "hi."

Yamikani echoed by saying that "the classes are too big, and they don't say 'hi' like I said [they do it] at home…. But here [in the U.S.] everyone comes to the class… sometimes you're lucky enough to sit next to somebody who said to you 'hi.'"

The relationships and friendships the students talked about created opportunities for them to study together. For instance, Suzie observed that

> In the first semester, if we wanted to, we had a ready-made study group because a lot of professors say [that] it's easier if you go through this material in groups. And whether we used it as much as we should have or not, it was there for us if we needed it. 'Cause it's kind of intimidating, like, in anthropology there was, like what? Two hundred and fifty people? Something that. And for you to go and just say to someone

> …[the] person next to you, "Joe-schmo," whoever, "You wanna study this weekend? I don't understand this" [laughs]. It's a lot easier if you know those people to be, like, "help me out a little." … So that made it easier that way.

Yamikani explained her understanding of the rationale behind having three classes together in the following way:

> I think it [taking three classes together] brought us closer. Because I think if we just lived together and were not taking classes together, we would only meet if we bumped into each other… But [by] taking classes together, we would meet for the class, and maybe we'd help each other sometimes.

Ways of helping

During the focus group sessions, the students were asked to give some examples of help they offered to or received from their peers. The examples were numerous. Saifi felt there was more social type of help than academic.

> I think you look at the goal in terms of putting these people together to get better grades…. I think that's not been achieved … because really the goal of really just putting people together in similar classes [was] just to bring them together, bring them closer together rather than working on a good grade together…. I think academically the help hasn't been as much as [it] could have been because you get as much help from each other as you live in any other residence hall, but if you look at this that way in terms of academics, that's not true.

Other students provided some examples of social help:

- I took her [Yamikani] home to my family over Thanksgiving, and she thinks of my family as one of her other families here. She has a couple of families she's close to here, from church, and stuff. She bought a little Christmas present for my sister, stuff like that. So we, kind of, help each other (Jennifer).
- I helped somebody, who was in learning community last semester; he's asked me [for help] relationship wise, like, he got a letter to join the Honors program. He's asking

me all these questions: "Should I do this? What should I do?" And so I help people that way more than probably academics (Anne).

- He [peer mentor Ayaz] was older. He's been through a lot of stuff, and it was nice to talk to him as an older student, you know, to see how he would suggest something for me and ask him if he had gone through this or that (Bob).
- I just go and talk to somebody else. [I] just say, "I think it's boring" [and] get some insight on the paper. That kind of thing. But, it's like, I would get some insight from somebody definitely from the cross-cultural learning community (Yamikani).

Yamikani's example illustrates the type of help that is both social and academic: she goes to her peers to discuss her class assignment. Suzie gave her example of how the learning community members helped each other academically.

> We'll barter, like, math for English. [laughs] Because my math skills are very limited but I'm OK at English, so I'll go over their English paper for them if they'll help me figure something out with math. … For instance, one of the students is in English 105 right now; I think he's from Bolivia, I'm not sure, but he has to do papers. He gets the sheet that says [that] he needs to talk about this, and he'll write it up. [Then] he'll ask me to read it and make sure his grammar is ok. And if there is something wrong, I'll read it, I'll read it out for him, and then I'll read, like, how it should be, and so that he could hear how it should [be], you know. So he is… he's only done three papers, but they've gotten better already. And he's so appreciative too…. And it's good for me to be able to help out.

The person Suzie often bartered with was not a learning community member. Nevertheless, this example is relevant here since it characterizes the prevailing atmosphere on the floor where the learning community members lived. In fact, Suzie admitted herself

> It's just the house really … because there were international students that weren't involved in the learning community. Just, like, there were American students that weren't [involved], but we all got to know each other, at least well enough that we could say, you know, "Help me out a little bit here."

"Living with the floor"

All the learning community members, except two, lived in the same residence hall, Devitt Hall, and on the same split-level floor. One of the learning community coordinators once commented on the way the students live in the residence hall. She said, "They don't live with roommates. They live with their floor." The following students' comments explain the meaning of these words.

- I think we're a lot closer to each other than any other floor on campus (Saifi).
- I think this floor is very noisy.... There are always people around (Juan).
- That's because we are close to each other (Yamikani).
- I know that there's usually, like, less activity as a group on the weekends. 'Cause I know on other floors, there will be groups of people who are, like, "Oh, let's go out, the parties, or let's go out to do this." But during the week, I think there's more activity between us simply because the international students need help with classes or need help with, like, different meetings or different week-type activities that are more academically oriented (Bob).
- I know most of the Americans, who live here, and they are nice and also if you see them anywhere they say, "Hi! How are you?" (Juan).

Again, what Conrad said about his fraternity differed from "living with the floor." He observed, "What Suzie said: everybody on the floor chitchatting about having a paper due and all this stuff. It wasn't, like, in front of my face: assignments due, study groups and stuff."

The learning community had an assigned peer mentor, Ayaz, who lived on the same floor with the rest of the learning community members. It was interesting to find out what role he played in the students' transition.

Having a peer mentor

The students were asked how they understood the role of Ayaz in the residence hall and learning community in general. The students came up with a range of descriptions for how they perceived what Ayaz did.

- I've talked to her [RA] a lot and I think Ayaz does the same thing for the guys' floor. I think it's great that he's there because he's kind the RA of [guys] (Anne).
- I think Ayaz is supposed to be in charge of the learning community and, like, international relations... But there were some cultural conflicts and personality conflicts, and a lot of time he dealt with that (Bob).
- I think he helps for both [academics and social life], but I didn't have lots of problems with the academics, so I just used to have questions about here on campus, who to see for what, that kind of thing (Yamikani).
- Last semester, I had problems with math, so he helped with academics (Saifi).
- He was the one who taught me football (Saifi).
- From my today's meeting with the LC coordinators, I understood that having a peer mentor Ayaz was a great help to both coordinators and students. Ayaz is a senior student from Pakistan. Interestingly, Indian Saifi made good friends with Pakistani Ayaz (the observer's diary, 11/25/1999).

The relationships between Ayaz and the international students differed from those between him and the U.S. students. The following comments of the international students underscore this conclusion:

- I think it [the fact that Ayaz is an international student] makes a huge difference because he really knows what difficulties international students experience; and if you had an American in that position I don't know if it would be like this (Saifi).
- Most Americans go to the RA when they need help, and we go to Ayaz (Saifi).
- I don't think [the] American students were very close to him, like international students.... Because my roommate, she's not used to him, because I remember I always told her just to go to Ayaz, when there was a problem, and she said, "No, I

> can't talk to him." So I would have to bring her there and she came with me and that way … I don't think it would be the same if it was an American student, maybe American students would be closer to that person than international students (Yamikani).

Indeed, most U.S. students admitted they had either little or no interaction with their peer mentor. The only exception was Bob who developed a friendship with Ayaz. He said, for instance,

> We probably spent half and hour to an hour a day just talking. He's about to graduate. He comes from the Middle East…. It was kind of nice to talk to him as somebody from that culture … and … familiarize myself with that area of the world…. Plus just on a friend level. He became a good friend; it was nice to have somebody to talk to like that.

Faculty and staff

Additionally, the students were asked if there were any differences between the faculty and staff members involved in the learning community and those who were not. For Bob, there was no pronounced difference. "[It] wasn't like, I was like 'oh, [these are] my learning community teacher[s], so they are different from teachers outside.' I didn't see really any difference," he said.

In contrast, both Juan and Yamikani noticed some difference:

- I think I really felt more confident talking to them than to any other [faculty and staff member] (Juan).
- Yeah, it's like, they know that people have had different experiences, so they don't have unrealistic expectations; they just want to know more about you, they are just excited about you. That's what I really liked (Yamikani).

Similarly, the researcher noted the difference. In her diary, she wrote:

The atmosphere in the learning community seminar classroom is very student friendly and informal. Both coordinators do their best to make the students feel comfortable in their class. The coordinators often come in five to ten minutes before a class begins to have a friendly chat with the students who are already there and set the classroom ready either for their own activities or guest speakers' activities. One of the coordinators often wears an African ethnic dress.

The topics of conversation before class range from the coordinators' complementing a student on her hairstyle to trying to arrange for a Japanese student an opportunity to exchange lessons of English and Japanese with another student. When the class begins, both coordinators remain informal and friendly. They try to make sure every student participates in a discussion and show their support for international students who have difficulty speaking English. Even if a student gets in a bit late, they greet him with "Hi! We're just talking about…" and try to involve that student into their discussion.

One of the most important goals of this learning community was to enhance students' cross-cultural awareness and understanding. The learning community organizers attempted to create numerous opportunities for the students to increase their cross-cultural awareness and understanding. The focus group questions were designed so as to encourage the participants to discuss how they perceived these opportunities.

Cross-cultural Awareness and Understanding

The students were prompted to discuss what they thought about living on the floor and taking three classes together with individuals from other cultures, taking a class from an instructor who was a non-native speaker of English, doing some assignments and activities related to culture, and attending out-of-class activities with people from other cultures.

Although at the beginning of the focus group sessions, both the U.S. and international students expressed their disappointment with the cross-cultural side of the learning

community, the following discussion illustrates that the students did become more cross-culturally aware and understanding. Specifically, they were able to overcome some of their stereotypes and to see culture and cultural differences more relativistically. Further, the participation in the cross-cultural learning community gave the students a chance to realize and appreciate the importance of the firsthand experiences with individuals from other cultures. These firsthand experiences entailed some cultural conflict, which brought the students one step closer to the active understanding of cultural differences and one step closer to learning how to collaborate with individuals characterized by those differences.

General perceptions of the cross-cultural aspect of the learning community

While the students' responses indicated their appreciation of the role of the learning community experience in their transition, the students appeared to be somewhat disappointed with the cross-cultural aspect of this experience. Although both the U.S. and international students seemed to have higher expectations than what this experience could offer, their responses differed considerably.

What did the U.S. students say?

- But it is different; the people are different, there's less culture conflict than I thought there would be. There's less … I guess, those students who are foreign … there is less that they show their cultures … they just adapted very well to American culture, more quickly than I expected. And I guess it was easier for them to pick up our culture than it would be, I guess, to pick up their culture (Bob).
- I agree. I think they … feel, like, since they are in the U.S., they want to try to be as American as they can and, you know, most of us… Well, we are all American, so they, kind of, wanna see what we're doing and get … be as normal as they can. And that's their way of learning what our culture is like, as they want to experience it (Tasha).

- I thought there would be more international students here because at least half of us are American on the floor, which, I mean, … I thought there would be more international students from more different places than it is. I mean, the people who I associate with most on a day-to-day basis are American because that's who live around us for the most part on our floor (Anne).

What did the international students say?

- It seemed, like, not everybody was willing to learn about other countries. Maybe, … I saw that some people didn't want to learn about other countries, they were just willing to … they wanted to confirm what they have thought about other places, and when they found out that it wasn't exactly like that, they were not exactly impressed and they switched off. So, it was like, kind of, one-way thing. We're the only ones who were willing to know about how things go around here (Yamikani).
- A lot of the … especially American students, they have these wild fantasies about other countries. These are wild things they probably live with. So they think if you come from India, you live in trees or something. But if you say you don't live in trees in India, they are almost, like, disappointed. They think, "You're from India [so] you go to school on elephant? Oh, you go to school by bus like we do. How boring!" (Saifi).
- They just turn off, like, "What's the point?" and so … they are not excited together [with international students] anymore. … Their interest is all gone.... But if, like, somebody from another culture thought I stayed in trees and I told them I didn't … I wouldn't give up, I'd want to learn more about *what* happens there. But with the people from the host country when they hear I don't live in trees, it's, like, "What's the point of us learning about the culture?" (Yamikani).

These attitudes may have affected the possibility for friendships between students from the host culture and international students.

Cross-cultural friendships

Juan shared his disappointment about having few friends from the host culture. He said,

> I mean, in my case a lot of my friends are international students, but not exactly American students. Anyway, the learning community was assigned for one semester and anyway they are all international students you're close to…. I mean, you live in another country but your friends are international students [laughs].

He continued, "I think normal, like, common American students … they don't like to talk or interact with international students."

Although both Yamikani and Saifi agreed that most of their friends are international students, they were able to offer a reasonable explanation for that.

- International students were much more like you in this setting than American students [were]. Even though the American students were pretty helpful and they would always help you … but it's just this psychological thing…. I think it's all to international students who like to bond among themselves, and it's not only the Americans who are doing this, even to us this is happening (Saifi).
- If I was in my country and I saw people who were like me, it would be easier to bond with people who are like me than with people who are very different. So they find it easier also to bond with people like them rather than go out and … *struggle* with somebody who is very different. Because it can be quite a struggle, especially with things like language. Because just looking at me they don't know if I can speak English. So … they feel like "maybe, she doesn't speak English."(Yamikani).

What Yamikani said about the language barrier was true for Juan whose spoken English still needs some improvement. At certain times, he admitted his difficulties communicating with persons from the host culture. The U.S. students also mentioned the language problem frequently. Tasha, for instance, asked the researcher if she personally has difficulty

understanding the American students when they speak. Some students touched upon the issue of language when they were talking about their team projects. This issue will be discussed in more depth later in the context of the students' experiences with international team members. Another thing that can prevent international friendships from occurring is stereotyping.

Stereotypes

Saifi and Yamikani did not exaggerate when they noted the tendency among the U.S. students to stereotype international students. It turned out that Yamikani's roommate indeed thought about her in the way Yamikani described. Jennifer confessed, "The first thing that I thought of when I heard she's from Africa was, 'Oh my god! She lives in a hut or she lives in the trees with monkeys!'" On the other hand, Suzie was more concerned about what stereotypes internationals may have about Americans. "So that was kind of interesting to figure out once we got talking … to figure out what those stereotypes actually were, and then trying to help break them," stated Suzie.

The U.S. students were not the only ones who had to overcome stereotypes. The international students also admitted having certain stereotypes about Americans. Yamikani, for instance, said:

> I used to think it was party, party, party, but I noticed it's not exactly that [laughs]. My "party, party, party" vision was a very distorted one, I think it was a TV version or something. Now I know they also study. … I used to think … when you go to school, it's all about being famous. … I thought it was all about you go drinking, you go partying, and then you go to class and you find out who was at the best party … this kind of thing, the social life only, nothing else. ... And I have noticed it's not true: they think about grades, GPAs, and … people actually sleep, you know, eat…

Interactions with representatives from other cultures proved to help the students to overcome some of their stereotypes. Tasha's example captures this point very well:

> One thing that I really enjoyed doing was [a paper we had to write] in our anthro[pology] recitation.... I honestly had stereotypes. I had my own ideas about people from the Middle East ... I think my stereotypes went right along with the people that we see on TV [who] are terrorists and they just happen to be Muslim. And my perception of the Islamic religion was that it seems to be very violent for some reason to me.... And I happened to do my paper on someone who practices the Islamic religion and I really got to learn a different point of view other than I see on TV. And I think sometimes being an American, I see on TV the craziness that they have and I ... associate it with that part of their culture.... And he helped me to realize that there is a peaceful side to that religion. And it really opened my eyes, and I think that was a big part for me: learning, and understanding, and overcoming the stereotype that I had.

In addition to students' interactions with individuals from different cultures, the readings in English 104 were selected in a way that would help the students become aware of existing stereotypes and overcome them.

> Today, the class discussed *The myth of the Latin woman: I just met a girl named Maria,* one of their home readings that tells about "a constant struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina" (Brandon, Ed., 1995, p.314). This is the struggle the author experienced herself. Although very well educated and privileged to have the entrees into society, on several occasions she was subjected to the ignorant and offensive behavior. This type of behavior stemmed from the two most commonly held myths about Latinas: they are capable of doing only menial and domestic jobs, and because of their appearance and ways of dressing they have to enjoy sexual innuendoes from Anglo-American males. Judith Ortiz Cofer says, " So I do understand how things can be lost in translation. When a Puerto Rican girl dressed in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has

been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place" (p.312).

In the class discussion, we focused on the phrase "things can be lost in translation." The students agreed that cross-cultural messages often get distorted due to the lack of holistic understanding of the cultural context and due to existing stereotypes (the observer's diary, 11/4/1999).

In this learning community, the students had numerous opportunities to discuss cultural stereotypes and prejudice. An interesting discussion between the students took place in English 104 when they were reflecting on a play "The good times are killing me." Most students, predominantly learning community members, attended the play on the weekend before the class.

An African-American woman walked into the class. She was introduced as the director of "The good times are killing me." The first question she asked the students was "what did [they] see there?" Although at first reluctantly, some students noted that a black family looked better than a white family: the former lived in a better house; they dressed better. There were two parents in the black family whereas in the white family the father left. Yamikani asked an interesting question if that was a real life contrast. "Because coming from a different country, I was taught the opposite," she explained. The director left this question for the students to answer....

When the African-American male student argued that nothing changed in terms of stereotypes and prejudice, Tasha passionately disagreed with him. She shared with her experience visiting Atlanta, where she was in minority and "people there felt more superior because they achieved more than [Tasha's] family." She also said that "the fact that [she] joined the cross-cultural learning community is a proof that things have changed. There was racism in the community where [she] grew up, but [she] overcame this." However, the director of the play supported the African-American student and agreed with what he said earlier. She stated, "Stereotypes

haven't changed. People say that in Cosby's show, it's not possible to have two doctors in one black family."

Yamikani believed that "stereotypes are generational: stereotypes change from generation to generation…."

The male student who fought in Bosnia shared his idea concerning stereotypes. "Stereotypes come back. I've seen the countries with a war and hatred" (the observer's diary, 10/5/1999).

Different or similar?

The students were asked if they noticed more differences or similarities between themselves and peers from other cultures. Interestingly, the U.S. students saw more similarities than differences. The following comments illustrate the similarities they saw:

- We all act like teenagers (Anne).
- We're all fairly young (Bob).
- Fun loving (Jennifer).

However, Jennifer did observe a difference between her roommate and her:

> I noticed the difference with Yamikani, because in Africa, and she said this too, they don't mature nearly as fast as we do. I took her home over Thanksgiving and she was so surprised how mature my younger sister acts, she's in the eighth grade…. And I can tell, she's [Yamikani] a junior and she doesn't act like most of the juniors here would act. And she said that too, she thinks that people in our society are forced to mature a lot faster…. So that's the difference I found with her. But there are far more similarities between us (Jennifer).

Conversely, the international students felt there were more differences than similarities between them and the U.S. students. Yamikani felt that the major difference was "about living in a [learning] community but outside the cross-cultural learning community

nobody else lives as a community." On several occasions, she also mentioned the lack of interaction among students on the campus:

> I say "hi" to them [U.S. students], it's like, "hi" and it ends there: there's no "How are you?" There is no "Where are you staying?" There is no, [when] next time I see them on campus just walking, "How are you doing today?" Maybe they say "hi," but it's a very fast "hi," and by the time you said "hi" back, they are gone. Like I said, there is no interaction.

While Juan shared Yamikani's perceptions, Saifi agreed only to a certain extent that "differences are much more pronounced than similarities." In fact, what Yamikani perceived as a cultural difference was not a difference for Saifi:

> It's [what Yamikani said about greetings] totally different from the country I come from. It's like, when you're walking on the street you just don't say "hi" to anybody, and the thing I noticed is that here you do. I mean … because you were taught never say "hi" to a stranger. And here suddenly people say, "hi, how's it going?" to people they don't even know. … If somebody says "hi" to you, you think, "Do I know this person?" [laughs]

Saifi's comment serves as a good segue to a forthcoming discussion of the relativity of culture and cultural differences. Some of the students faced a situation where cultural differences were not clear cut but rather fell into a gray area. These experiences taught the students to approach the culture contextually and, as a consequence, see it more relativistically.

Relativism in perceptions of culture and cultural differences

Several learning experiences were designed in a way that would help the students realize the relativity of culture and cultural differences.

> Today, in English 104, we started reading *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe Chinua, the powerful book that teaches critical thinking and understanding that we are not living in a perfect world. Nor are we living in the world of dualities and absolutes. I am looking forward to hearing what the students will think about the book and what connections they will be making between discussions of the book in this class and in their anthropology class (the observer's diary, 10/26/1999).

The following example illustrates how a specific learning community experience helped the students learn how to approach cultural differences relativistically.

> In the today's learning community seminar, the guest speaker had the students do an interesting activity. The students first completed Joyce Bishop's Personality Spectrum, which helped them determine their personality type: organizer, adventurer, giver or thinker. Then they got into four groups according to their personality type. Interestingly, there were no cultural patterns in the groups' composition; all four groups were culturally heterogeneous.
>
> Further, each group was given a short group project: to write on a poster their learning style characteristics. Each group's dynamics was interesting to watch because differences in approaching the task were apparent. Organizers, for instance, were the first ones to jump at the task and write their learning style characteristics on their poster. Adventurers, on the other hand, took their time and it wasn't until a couple of minutes before their time was up when they finally started arranging their things on the poster (the observer's diary, 10/29/1999).

During the focus group sessions, the students were asked how they interpreted this activity. Bob offered his interpretation:

> I think they were *trying* to get the point across that people from different cultures have different ways of learning, study habits and stuff like that. But even within the group, there was, like, this culture does this thing this way… The one that I remember was the Japanese culture, and they were, like, "this is how Japanese people do things"

> and then they asked the member of our floor from Japan [if it was right]. "No, we do it this way," [he said].

When the researcher asked him to explain possible reasons for such discrepancy, Bob said,

> I think, like, it might be just the outdated material, or that things are constantly changing or they might have gotten material from, say, 1995 and now things might have changed drastically, or even in the shorter period of time. Or maybe he [the Japanese student] was just different.

For Yamikani, English 104 with its assignments and activities helped her to move towards a more relativistic understanding of the concept of culture. She stated,

> I think it was a very good class because … first of all, when we just came here I was looking at American culture as so different from my culture, and I was just looking at it just in this way. … But in [the] English class, we had so many cultures, it, kind of, made me realize that if other cultures seem to be weird, maybe my culture seems weird, too. And I just found it very interesting because we used to analyze things and that made us go and find out about other cultures. … I enjoyed this cross-cultural class.

Similarly, Saifi felt that the whole learning community experience was conducive to his seeing the culture in more relativist terms.

> Before coming here, it was almost, like, there's one world's culture. But after coming here, [I realized] there are so many different cultures, and they are all equally good. It's not like one culture is better than another [is], now I'm almost, like, totally accepting other cultures…. We study other cultures, like India, and you see, like, in this part of the world it's ok to have five wives, and people, like, "What's wrong with these people?"

Not every exposure to culture, however, can teach the relativistic approach to culture and cultural differences and can help to overcome cultural stereotypes. The participants were asked to reflect on the ways in which these goals can be achieved.

Best ways of learning and understanding about different cultures

When asked what the best ways are to learn about different cultures, many students stressed the firsthand interactions with representatives of these cultures.

- Living on the floor was what really advanced my understanding [of other cultures] (Bob).
- There are things that I learned from my roommate a lot. I think, "Oh my gosh, this is nuts, I can't believe that you'd do that! You guys are nuts for doing that!" but it really makes me realize little things like that you never ever realize unless you interact with people (Jennifer).
- I mean, I came from South America and I think my culture is really involved with American people and things like that. But one thing is, like, what you see on TV, or [having] just few American friends… But here everybody is American and so … everything is so different and I think I still don't understand … I mean, even when I'm with American people I don't know what to say or a lot of parties … there is everybody "What's up? What's up?" … I don't know what to say (Juan).
- Reading about them [other cultures] doesn't sometimes tell the whole truth, because people who used to think that I lived in a tree had read a lot of things and they had watched a lot of movies [laughs]. But living with somebody could tell…. So long as you don't take that person's characteristics, I think interacting with them [people from other cultures] is more helpful (Yamikani).

The actual experiencing a different culture is also a good way to learn about that culture:

- The thing I learned most from was the presentation on food because it was different things from different cultures right there in front of your face. You could take it this way or you could see it this way. … It was right there, and you could take it how you wanted to (Suzie).
- One of the four teams chose to make a presentation on food as a reflection of culture. Each member of the team prepared some dish representing his/her culture. A girl from Sweden cooked pea soup. After she spoke about the soup, the recipe and tradition that goes with the soup, and after other team members served the pea soup to

> the rest of the class, the instructor and guests, the presenter was asked a question. A male student who was born in Korea and then at the age of 11 moved with his family to Equador asked her how they eat the soup, and whether they put it on rice. The girl's brows raised but she replied calmly that they eat it on its own.
>
> What an excellent example to illustrate how expectations can vary culturally! What may have seemed to the Swedish girl a funny question to ask, for someone from a culture where rice is staple food it made a perfect sense to use the dense pea soup as a sauce for rice (the observer's diary, 12/7/1999).

Living with a person from another culture can enhance these firsthand experiences considerably. As noted earlier, one of the students' expectations was to have a roommate from another country. The majority of students–both U.S. and international–were disappointed that this expectation was not fulfilled. The following comment is representative of what the students felt about it:

> [I expected] that every person will get, like, an American roommate: international student with an American student. It was supposed to be like that, but it wasn't how it turned out to be, not everybody lived together … like, there may be two international students together, two Americans together. …Being a part of the learning community, I would prefer to live with an American student (Saifi).

Not every student, however, was ready to live with an international roommate. Bob, for instance, requested an American roommate. He explained his decision in the following way:

> I knew it'd be an international floor, and I thought it'd be something interesting to be around international people, to be able to interact with them but…. I thought it would be nice to have an American roommate, so that I at least could go back to my room and have my place where it was the culture and what was going in the room was what I was used to…. So that I could step out onto the floor and be, you know, immersed in different cultures and different traditions, different lifestyles, but then I'd have that

> "safety zone" in my room with an American roommate that I could interact with him, talk to, you know, on equal level.

The only students who had a chance to benefit from living with somebody from a different culture were Jennifer and Yamikani. Jennifer was asked if she didn't miss her "safety zone." This is what she said,

> I expected me and [Yamikani] to fight, not fight but … I mean, we get along really well, we clicked a lot easier than I thought we would have. And … we fight, not fight, but we have little debates about … cultural differences all the time, like, couple times daily. [Yamikani] teaches me a lot and I didn't really expect to get that much out of it. I really learned a lot about a culture of hers.

Yamikani was also asked what it was like to live with an American roommate. Her reply was very consistent with what Jennifer said:

> I think it helps to learn about the American culture. It helps [my roommate] to learn more about my culture … because most of the things that she finds to be weird are the things that she sees in the room, rather than the things I do all day…. Outside, I'm just a student, so she doesn't see any weird things outside than she sees inside…. Just the way I carry myself in the room, and, like, when I go to school, I wear jeans like just everybody does, every other American…. When I'm in my room that's where I can wear my traditional clothes, I can eat my traditional food, I can listen to my traditional music, and she is, like, "What kind of thing you're doing?" … Like, I'll just behave the way I would behave when I'm at home because I'm in my room. So, it's everything from the way I dress to the way I carry myself, just everything…. She can see my hair standing up [laughs].

No cultural conflict?

At the beginning of the focus group session, Bob complained that there was not much cultural conflict in this cross-cultural learning community. Although the participants were not

very much reflective of it, conflict emerged. It was apparent in the American students' attitudes towards their English 104 instructor.

International instructor

Some U.S. students indicated that they did not feel very comfortable in English 104 and that their instructor—born and raised in Greece but a U. S. citizen now—did not acknowledge their own culture. Tasha, who was quoted earlier as the one who believed that the situation with cultural stereotypes and prejudice changed for the better, said:

- We didn't come here blind, you know. We knew we were going to deal with international people and we all chose to do that. And I think one thing that was along with that because you want to, you want to learn to deal with people like that. I don't think we were given a credit for that. She [the instructor] put me in a tough spot because she made me feel almost ashamed that I was American. I took offense to some arguments that she made and that some of the arguments that our speakers also made.

Anna and Bob did not feel comfortable in the class for slightly different reasons:

- I think she almost denied that we had a culture, that Americans had their own culture (Anne).
- She assigned us to write about … traditions, like, about holiday or certain activity and … she said, "You can't write about 4th of July, you can't do about Christmas…." And she just threw all of these very American or very Western traditions, holidays … like they weren't important. And then she told the international students, "Oh, you can write about the same things because you all have different experiences with them." And … I know the way I would celebrate Christmas or 4th of July; it's definitely not in the same way as Suzie or Tasha or Conrad would. But I think she denied us that chance to express our view of our culture (Bob).

Familiarity with a wider context of the situation and a pedagogical rationale behind the instructor's decision helps to understand why "she denied [the U.S. students] that chance to express [their] view of [their] culture."

> When the students were given their first written assignment and explained what was expected from them, they were also asked not to write "trite" papers like "athletic events, first-day of school or college experiences" because "these stories have been written a number of times." This was the Stekoula's way to prevent the students from plagiarizing. In fact, instructors of Freshman Composition are strongly encouraged to assign original topics, instead of topics that can be easily pulled off the Internet.
>
> The second written assignment sheet said, "Write about your experience with a holiday or ceremony and analyze the meaning that its celebration has for you and other people in the country…do not write about Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, or 4th July. (Observer)

Although Stekoula did not write on the second assignment sheet the reason why she did not want the students to write about these holidays, since Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, or 4th July belong to topics that are often written about, it can be assumed that the rationale for her decision was the same as with the first assignment.

Suzie was not comfortable in the class either, although her culture was acknowledged. The following example illustrates how her cultural background was acknowledged:

> Last time the English 104 instructor read an essay written by one of her students. This was a powerful essay about a painful experience a Cherokee girl had because of her cultural background. Today, when reading some of the students' papers, I learned that the Cherokee girl, "a prairie nigger" as her classmate called her, was Suzie (the observer's diary, 9/18/1999).

Although the paper was read with the author's permission, Suzie seemed to be embarrassed that the instructor often would single her out. During the focus group session, she said, for instance,

> I think I was kind of lucky in the class because she viewed me as a special kind of American, I think … because I wrote about my native American heritage and stuff a lot. And she viewed that as, like, I don't know, an extra American.

The international students also commented on these attitudes of the U.S. students towards their instructor. "I think that the American students especially were not really accepting of the idea that their teacher was a non-native speaker," was Saifi's analysis of the issue. Jennifer's comment resonated with what Saifi said:

> She [the instructor] just picked on my word choice all the time. All she did was, like, reword my sentences and get my paper back and it's all red marked, but it wasn't because of my grammar, errors or anything like that. It was just her opinion: I should use this word instead of that, it's a matter of opinion.

When asked directly if they had a problem with a non-native speaker marking their papers red, Bob reported,

> Yea, I think it was kind of ... I mean, not that she was … it's more than just the fact that she's not American. … I mean, I don't ever expect to be able to know another language as well as I know English, especially, like, American, like, dialect. And I think just the way she went about it was, like, "we don't want to use this word … because it's, like, slang" or something. "We wanna use this word," this big word, this impressive big English word would look better, but, I mean, in common… And she's, like, "you have to focus your paper toward this audience." But in my writing … I'm focusing it towards a group of students, using slang, that's what the audience is gonna read…. And if you're going towards the public audience… and, it's like, using these big words, we most Americans don't know, some of the words she told me to use *I didn't even know*!

The perception that a person with an accent can not know better than a native speaker is rather common. The instructor seemed to be aware of this perception.

> Stekoula brought the students their first papers. While explaining grading to them, she stressed, "I doesn't matter if you are a native speaker or not. All have an equal chance to get an A." Sometime earlier, she mentioned to me that in the last-year cross-cultural section, the U.S. students felt somewhat relaxed when they realized that some of their peers are international. That's probably why Stekoula emphasized that the students' grades will be based on their learning effort (the observer's diary, 9/15/1999).

International team members

The participants were asked to reflect on the team projects that they were assigned to complete in English 104. They also were asked if the fact that people were from different cultures affected the dynamics of the teamwork and if there were any cultural conflicts. According to Bob,

> They were just … personality conflicts. Because there were several people from, like, the same culture that we did our project with; they've always been prompt and very, you know, let's get this done and stuff like that. I think it just the people we dealt with, [they] were really shy or really lazy… or just they personally weren't suited for the project.

While both the international and US students said there were no cultural conflicts, rather personality conflicts, the divide between the U.S. and international team members on this issue was apparent, especially in terms of leadership in their team projects.

The international and U.S. students almost unanimously agreed that it was the latter who took the lead on the projects. The following comments shed some light onto the group dynamics.

What did the U.S. students say?

- Anne and I had the same group. I think honestly [that] Anne and I shouldered most of the burden (Bob).

- Some of the international kids, we didn't feel comfortable letting them speak, like, the whole time. Because first of all, they are kind of hard to understand sometimes (Jennifer).
- I think another reason why we, kind of, took it was because we weren't sure [that] they understand what we wanted them to do…. I mean could they handle what we wanted them to do? … In the capacity we wanted them to do? (Anne)
- We've all in one time in our life in high school or junior high, have been taught a little bit about public speaking, about speaking in a group, some ways of presenting information, some basic dos and don'ts about speeches. And I think that's one thing to that international students struggled with because they didn't seem to be up to par (Tasha).

What did the international students say?

- I think [the] American students were much more active. Because they almost felt it was their job to be more active… (Saifi)
- [The] American students [took the lead], I think it's something natural, because, I mean, American students, they are good speakers, they have writing skills, they know English, they can find things easier, faster… (Juan).

As can be seen from the above comments, for the most part, language skills were the reason why the international students were not entrusted with leadership roles.

Yamikani's description of what happened in her team was somewhat different. She said,

> Everybody was a storyteller, so all that happened… [laughs] this one has this story to tell, this one. … So we didn't actually have the leader. I had actually to get what we were supposed to get, I had to email whenever we needed to get something from Stekoula but otherwise we didn't have the leader because all of us were just storytellers.

Teamwork skills

One of the goals the learning community sought to achieve was to develop the students' teamwork skills. The students faced with double challenge in this respect: not only were they expected to collaborate but also to collaborate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Teamwork or segmentation?

> Today the students presented their group projects. The four groups decided to demonstrate how food, religion, gender roles/sexual conduct, and rituals of celebration reflect culture. The learning community coordinators were also invited. Although the students seemed to have divided topics and each of them worked on their chunk independently, they seem to have done at least some planning of the presentation together. Some of the groups did a better job in transitions from one student to another and from one section of presentation to another than other groups. It apparently depended on the amount of time the students spent with their group discussing their presentation (the observer's diary, 12/7/1999).

During the focus groups, the students were asked to discuss the extent of their collaboration and the frequency with which they met out-of-class to discuss the projects. Most teams did not spend much time outside of the classroom. While Conrad did not seem to be upset that they just "split up [their] parts and come together the day before," Yamikani was disappointed with the way they approached their team project:

> It was like, almost everyone was doing their own [thing], I think you could have noticed from our presentations … everybody was just … whenever we came as a group, we'll be, like, "Ok, fine, what are we doing?" I would always ask that question, so we're doing this, let's talk about it, everybody would just, like, "I'm gonna do this," this one says, "I'm gonna do that" and this one says, "I'm gonna do that." It was like "*I* am going to do this" instead of "*WE* are going to do this."

Bob expressed his belief that he would have been able to do their team project on his own. However, he recognized the fact that some projects lend themselves better to teamwork. He said,

> I think, like, the project that our group did, I probably could have done that one by myself: we've just done interviewing, editing and stuff like that it wouldn't have been to hard for me. But, like, the group who did [the] food [presentation], that might be more difficult for me to do on my own: obviously I don't know many international recipes.... I think I could have, it just depends on the chosen topic (Beck).

Anne agreed,

> Yea, if you did [the] food [presentation], you would've had your American viewpoint on what the cultural food was. I mean, whereas we had actually people from [different] cultures doing their food and it gave us [an insight] on how they perceive the food, what it meant to them.

Conrad, who was not impressed with the food presentation, was sure that one person could have done the project he was involved with. "I was just commenting on some of the foods ... gross. I think we could've done our project individually. Ours was religions. I think we could have easily done that," he stated.

Juan shared Yamikani's perception that international students are "more willing to work as a group and that international students would try to find out what the group is doing so that they could share the information." Saifi disagreed with this perception, however. He argued that "generally, in ... [the] freshmen year a lot of people have not worked in groups before. ... Most people are not used to teamwork in the first year of college" whether they are international or American.

Against this context, the participants were asked to reflect on another activity in which they participated. This activity was described in detail at the beginning of Chapter 1.

Interestingly, the activity was designed to illustrate the negative aspects of competition and individualism but the students interpreted it differently.

Yamikani and Saifi, though not completely sure, had the closest interpretation. Yamikani agreed with Saifi when he said,

> I thought it was totally against teamwork, like, you were against these people. The one who gets more was the winner. It wasn't at all about team; maybe it meant to be that, [but] I thought it was all about you against these other people.

Bob saw different strategies behind the activity:

> In my group, we had Ayaz, myself, and one other person. A couple of us, she's [Tasha] gotten the paper, and just pulled. Ayaz, kind of, held a lot of paper loosely and, when we tore our part, he got all the stuff whereas she [Tasha] … I know, there are different strategies behind it, but I couldn't really relate it to cultural differences.

Tasha offered a somewhat different interpretation:

> Ayaz just, kind of, sat there and just waited and took his turn, and it was almost like he was picking his battles. You know, there are some things that you … really feel strongly [about], and you need to debate it … I think, there is a lot of conflict when it comes to different cultures. And there are some times when you just have to sit back and pick your battles and what's really important to you, and what you can just let go. That's what I got out of it.

Studying in groups

Another area related to teamwork skills is studying in groups and learning from peers. Saifi did not consider himself to be a group-study person. Despite her earlier comment about international students being better team members, Yamikani shared Saifi's attitudes towards studying in groups. She said,

> I like to learn just about other students, just finding out what happens around, like, general knowledge… not… with academics I'm also like that … I don't like

> [studying in groups], but, like, general knowledge, just current affairs I learn from other students.

On the other hand, Bob, as a result of the participation in the learning community, felt that he started

> wanting to study in groups [more] because [he] started seeing the benefit.... Before [he]'d study alone a lot of time in a high school, but when [he] got here, [they] studied in groups a lot, so [now he's] more, like, "Well, let's try to get together as a group of people to study.

Group activities in the classroom may have helped the students start seeing the benefit from studying together and believe in learning from their peers. In both English 104 and learning community seminar, the students were involved in various group activities. For instance, in English 104, the students were encouraged to work with their peers during writing workshops.

> Today, the students had their first in-class writing workshop. At the beginning, the students were unusually quiet. As soon as Stekoula handed out assignment sheets, the silence reigned in the class as everybody started writing fervently. It took the instructor several times to remind the students that the idea of the workshop implies working and discussing things with others. She strongly encouraged them to move around the room and to share their ideas and concerns not only with her, but also with their fellow students. Apparently, for students who were used to seeing writing as a completely solitary experience it was very unusual.
>
> If students did move around and discuss their writing with other students, they for the most part tended to gravitate to students from the same culture or subculture (Americans to Americans, Asian students to Asian students, learning community members to learning community members). With the instructor being very persistent, this class dynamics was slowly changing towards the end of the workshop (the observer's diary, 9/23/1999).

Ways of Improvement

The participants generously shared their ideas on what could have been different in this learning community. They suggested several ways on how this learning community could be improved.

Out-of-class activities

While Yamikani liked the drama the students attended and Saifi enjoyed watching the first-in-his-life football game, most of the students expressed the need for more out-of-class activities offering more interaction.

- More activities. Concerts … just be in touch. Do activities together (Saifi).
- I expected us to do more stuff together. Sure, we had a couple of classes together, but we didn't really do other stuff together. We went to the football game together, but it wasn't like we went as a group, we just kind of sat by each other. I mean, I thought we would go and play football together or something like that (Anne).
- We didn't really interact. I mean, we sat there and watched the whole stuff all time. So … we could have gone on our own (Jennifer).
- There wasn't a lot of interaction in any activities we did. It was, like, "let's go to the football game, and we went to the football game and we watched the football game, let's go to the theater, and, you know, watch theater." It wasn't, like, "let's go out to dinner and have, you know, a conversation, let's go out and play football" (Bob).
- [Or] like, play football or cricket and stuff and learn other people's sporting culture (Conrad).

Participant selection/informing the potential participants about the nature of the learning community

Since international students were asked if they wanted to join the cross-cultural learning community, Yamikani was curious how the American students got into this learning

community. "If we could have American students who really had interest in learning about other cultures or students, international students," she suggested.

When the focus group participants were asked about the reasons for joining the learning community and their expectations of it, it turned out that Conrad was not very well informed about the cross-cultural learning community and joined the learning community for reasons other than wanting to learn about different cultures. He said,

> They didn't really tell me much about it. They just asked if I wanna be in a community, take some classes … The person who pitched the idea to me told me that the classes that I'd be taking with the community; [it] would be easier to get into those, and I need those for my education major. So it was kind of double win in there.

Class choice

Some U.S. students felt that English 104 was not the best match for this learning community. The following comments attest to that:

- English is a hard subject to try to learn international stuff with…. I just I don't think that English is the appropriate time to learn about other cultures … because if we learned anything in English, it was more …about ourselves, because we ended up writing papers about our culture or about something like that…. Maybe a speech class would have been a little better, and, you know, using topics for speeches and that's how we learn more because it's more involving the entire class…. I personally think English, you can really learn what? (Tasha)
- I think in English, like you said, it's a hard place to have a multicultural learning and I think if maybe we've read other peoples' papers, because, like, we were given the topics of, you know, what is your family traditions…. I mean the other international students could write about what they were in, I think it would have been more interesting for us having been able to actually find out what those were. Because basically we were just turning in the papers, that was it. We never had any chance to

see anybody else's work. And I think it would have been more interesting in a cultural sense to have read other people's papers (Anne).

Challenge

In addition, some U.S. students felt the class was not challenging enough:

- I think a lot of us [thought] the class was a little bit lower level.... I think the class was more geared towards the students who didn't have any grasp of the grammar or syntax, anything like that.... So for me at least it was rather remedial, and it was just something I had to, kind of, wade through and just stick out because I had to take it. You know, I had to take it as a class whereas for the international students, I think, it was a really good learning device. I think Tasha is right, I think any other class, like speech, would have been more helpful (Bob).
- It wasn't challenging. I mean, the topic itself was challenging because you really didn't know what to write.... I like my English 105 class because he ... my professor makes me think about what's being said in the literature that we're reading, you know, how we perceive things, and the different techniques that people use to write. And I think that because we have more of a feel of those ideas, we've talked about advertising and things like that we kind of understand that. ... So it wasn't really challenging for any of us and we just kind of got it done, and said whatever, and didn't really try our hardest (Tasha).

Instructor versus instructor?

Today, Stekoula asked the students the question I've been waiting for, "How do you discuss the book in your anthropology class?" The students were somewhat uncooperative. Bob said that they discussed "how colonialism affected the tribe and the issues of kinship." Yamikani added that they discussed how colonialists used people who were outcasts to transform the tribe. Stekoula's question about religion and introducing Christianity while dismissing indigenous people's gods as bad ones was left unanswered (the observer's diary, 11/9/1999).

The international students' comments on reading the same book in the two classes shed some light on the reasons why the class was unwilling to talk about connections with anthropology. In fact, their answers to this question not only illustrate another way of how the learning community experience could be different but also can serve as a key to understanding of the aforementioned critical comments expressed by the American students towards the English class.

- Actually, it was a bit of confusion maybe because English and anthro[pology] teachers told us different interpretations of that book, it was almost, like, wrong thing: "This is how I see it and in my class you do this." We were pretty confused because having two teachers teaching a separate subject but you didn't see it work. I don't think it helped too much. They were criticizing each other almost.
- I think they [instructors] didn't like each other. Actually, what happened was the anthro[pology] teacher didn't seem to like English teacher because the English teacher actually asked us what we talked about in anthropology, but in anthropology we were told not to listen what our English teacher says.... "This is the right thing." And then we went to English and our English teacher asked what we discussed in anthropology, and nobody wanted to say anything because we have been told that ... [laughs]. Oh, it was very confusing...

Although the American students did not perceive the confusion as a problem, they echoed what the international students said. "The first day we walked into anthropology recitation, we were told to forget everything that we were taught in English about the book," said Tasha. This suggestion reaffirmed Conrad's negative attitude towards the class and as a result he "didn't think the discussion of the book in English was relevant at all. [He] didn't even listen most of the time."

"Good old days" or the experience in retrospect

Despite some critical comments, it seemed that the students were more appreciative of their learning experience when thinking about it in retrospect. Saifi appeared to be able to appreciate English 104 most of all. He said,

> While I was in this class I didn't really enjoy that class, but now when I'm taking English 105, which is totally an American class with an American teacher, I think I'm missing that English 104. But when I was actually doing English 104, I was pretty indifferent towards it.... I think this English 104 was better: she tried to give you essays everyone could, like, write about. Now, I am taking English 105, I've got to do this essay about sufferings of an American family during the Vietnam War! I obviously have no clue about the Vietnam War, coming from India... In English 104, you would never get a topic like that, because it was a cross-cultural section. That's why I liked it better.

Another reason for Saifi's being more appreciative was that the instructor acknowledged his British English.

> Our instructor in English 104 was much more accepting of that fact because she herself was from Greece and her English, too, was a bit more British. She always told me that my English is British, but she never meant that negatively. But now coming to English 105, to our instructor British English seems to be, like, a totally different language. It's like "because your English is much more British, you need some help with English...." I feel that I am getting much lower grade now (Saifi).

Yamikani appreciated the instructor's determination to bring different students subgroups together.

> We had just automatically divided into these groups: like, this is a group of American students who like each other, this is a group of international students who never speak to any American students, this is a group of international students who speak to American students *once* in a while, and this a group of American students who *never*

want to speak to international students. She's been good at making us cross each other's cultures; we needed to mix.

Other students felt nostalgic about the relationships they used to have among themselves.

> I think, it's like, we used to like talking to each other, as we were closer to each other, than to anybody else on the floor… I found out that, like, last semester I used to be better friends with CCLC [members] because we took, you know, a couple of classes together and we did things together with the people on the floor…. So whenever I felt like talking to someone, I talked to the CCLC [members] because they were the ones I felt closer to … because I didn't know a lot of people outside of the CCLC (Yamikani).

Anne agreed with Tasha when she said,

> It was nice to see the same faces…. I had classes with Jennifer every day. And … this semester … I never get to see her, I never talk to her, and [I don't know] what she is doing. We … knew each other's schedule and I had some extra classes with Conrad. So I saw him every day too, and I just, kind of, looked forward to that, because, you know, in a college of so many people it's nice to know that you know somebody. And this semester is really different because … you don't talk to people as much and you don't know their schedules like you did last semester.

Changes and Benefits

The majority of the students agreed that they changed as a result of this experience. Their comments indicate that they changed, for the most part, in terms of cross-cultural awareness:

- I think Iowa State really tries to stress diversity as a big part of what the university tries to stand for. And I think it's a lot easier for us who are a part of the community to understand the need to meet a diverse group of people and to be able to interact with them and…. I can't speak for everybody but it's easier now for us … to

understand and be empathetic towards other people who are coming here.... They have a lot more to deal with than sometimes we [Americans] do. ... And I think we all can deal with interactions with [other] people better now when we have lived with them, and we understand a little bit more why people do these things that they do. I'm less judgmental ... [I don't think] "Oh, that's so weird that they are doing that!" I think that's a really good idea on the university's behalf because they do stress diversity (Tasha).

- I thought I had a pretty open mind about things and I thought I was pretty culturally aware, but I got here and there are a lot more students, not just in the community, a lot of international emphasis in the entire university, and it really opened my mind a lot more than I thought it would.... In classes ... with other international students, it's a lot easier now. It's becoming easier and easier now that I [have been] liv[ing] on a floor with other students. And especially, like, dealing with people from cultures that are represented on the floor, like, before I might have been a little bit wary about approaching people from the Middle East or Asia. But living with people from those parts of the world, it's a lot easier for me to approach them and talk (Bob).
- I feel that ... there are a lot of different people, I am not just talking about different cultures, there are a lot of different people and everybody is different, so sometimes I just have to understand people (Juan).
- You understand that there are so many other different cultures out there; you're just more open and more accepting of what they believe and what they are, so you're less likely to make stereotypes of them if you meet different students in different classes (Anne).

Roommates Jennifer and Yamikani also believed that they changed:

- I don't see foreign people ... so scary as [I did] before.... I had some interaction with foreign people before, I don't know what it is, but I still have that little hunch "Oh, I don't about them. They are weird, or they are not going to be cool." But I don't feel so uncomfortable around them [international students] any more (Jennifer).
- Last semester, because we were so different, she [Jennifer] would just keep to herself and I would keep to myself, and nobody approached anybody.... But now that we are

used to each other we could joke about it or, you know, just ask questions, she could ask me all sorts of questions about my culture because now she's used to me. And I can ask her questions about her culture. And all the things she used to think were weird she asks me now … because now we are more open to each other. Because at first it was, like, "OK, strange," you know…(Yamikani).

In conclusion, the participants were asked to reflect on benefits from being involved in the learning community. The students reiterated what they said earlier about a smoother transition and learning about other cultures.

- It makes our transition to college easier and gives us the broad focus (Bob).
- When I was, like, in my country I was very confident about everything, very secure, I felt, like, I had control of everything, but here … on the first day, I remember, … I felt really-really insecure about everything. *Everything*. So I think this experience helped me … a lot to understand … maybe, the behavior of people here and also [made] me feel more confident about everything … anything that … if I have any problem [with]…. I know there are other people in the same situation. So it helped me a lot (Juan).
- In this cross-cultural [learning community] you get to learn that it's not about who is doing right, it just about your coming from another culture, and the way some things are done. It helped me to adjust to the American culture (Yamikani).
- This really does help you to settle in…. Other things … getting to know people, be more accepting, more understanding, you get to do some fun activities together (Saifi).
- I think that you don't have to start, like, from zero, you start with something, there is already something for you there … I mean some friends, you go to the same classes, you learn about culture (Juan).
- The same professors that would pay attention to you and would understand where you come from (Yamikani).

- I think [that] it would remove some of the stereotypes they [American students] are having about different people.... They are not as aware of other cultures as other cultures are of them (Saifi).

Besides obvious benefits of having a smoother transition to the university and the new culture in general and having an exposure to different cultures, some students talked about other benefits, probably less explicit.

- In our learning team class [learning community seminar], we had an advisor from political science come in and she was also with international studies, and that's what I want to do, so I switched over into political science and my focus is on Asia. So ... it started me there (Anne).
- I've used the fact that I was in a learning community, the fact that I dealt with different backgrounds, I used that in applying for a job. If I do get a job, I would be working for the school [doing the football recruiting].... They wanted to know what personality trait or what [I] can give to those prospective students.... And, you know, you have a ton of different types of football players, when you do come to Iowa State, you'll have to deal [with different people] ... So I used that, hopefully, ... that they see that as something the program can benefit from (Tasha).

The researcher asked the participants who, in their opinion, benefited more from this learning community experience. The following comments are representative of what the students felt about it.

- I wouldn't say one benefited more than another.... Iowa State really does focus on diversity and so gives us the ability to go in and get really close, firsthand experience with diversity, which really makes it easier to go out into the university and interact with students, and beyond that, like, in your careers interact with people (Bob).
- I think [that] it's beneficial for both international and American students (Saifi).
- ...because we learned a lot, they learned a lot. Because, like, the starting point where all of us live—it's quite different [laughs] (Yamikani).

Finally, the students agreed that they would like to live through this experience again and they would recommend this experience to other students. The following comments capture their reasons for feeling that way:

- The different experiences you get into just by hanging out, and different things you do. But that's definitely the people you meet and the way you interact (Bob).
- The people that you meet, the things, that you learn and they will stick with you, the stories that they tell you will stick with you.... You don't read it in textbooks.... What you get here, you can do all the reading in the world and you never get out of it what you get just talking to people, just hearing everyday little tidbit stuff (Tasha).

CHAPTER 5:
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter first provides a summary of the study and presents general conclusions based on the findings. Then the findings are compared with the relevant body of research reviewed in Chapter 2. Finally, implications for practice and suggestions for further research on learning communities in general and cross-cultural learning communities in particular are discussed.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a cross-cultural learning community at Iowa State University. To achieve this purpose, the investigator sought to answer three research questions:

- What role did this learning community play in the students' transition to university life?
- Did the cross-cultural learning community enhance cross-cultural awareness and understanding? If yes, in what ways?
- How did the students perceive this learning community experience in general?

A humanistic understanding of the culture prevailing in this learning community was critical in answering these questions. In search of this understanding, the researcher used an approach similar to Elizabeth Whitt's (1996) guidelines for assessing student cultures:

1. *Study student cultures from students' perspectives.* The two focus groups that constitute the basis of the study allowed the researcher to see the cross-cultural learning community or student subculture through the lens of its participants.

2. *Obtain as many diverse perspectives as possible.* The prolonged engagement in the study ensured the diversity of perspectives. The focus groups were preceded by a semester of classroom observation. During this semester, the researcher not only observed the two classes in this learning community, but also talked to the learning community coordinators and the English instructor.

   The focus groups themselves offered a diversity of perspectives. First, the researcher obtained two perspectives: one from the U.S. students and another from the international students. Second, the two students who did not live in the same residence hall offered their perspective as non-residential learning community members.

3. *Be prepared to hear what students say about their experiences.* The fact that the researcher had observed the community for the whole semester made this task rather challenging. Even though the researcher did not agree with some of the students' ideas and perceptions expressed during the focus group sessions (the perception that English 104 was not a good match for a cross-cultural learning community, for instance), she found them equally valid and incorporated them into the analysis of the data.

4. *Study student cultures in context.* The researcher approached this student microcosm as a part of the wider student culture. In other words, she always aspired to situate her observations and the students' comments into the context of both departmental and institutional culture.

5. *Use multiple methods to study student cultures.* The researcher observed English 104 for the fall 1999 semester and the learning community seminar for two and a half months. During the fall semester 1999, the researcher reviewed instructional materials and occasionally some students' papers, talked to the students during their writing workshops in English 104, and occasionally visited with the learning community coordinators and the English instructor. These research techniques together with the two focus groups ensured the triangulation of methods.

Evaluating the learning community in this way was conducive to the researcher's understanding of its culture in all its richness and complexity and enabled her to draw conclusions that are discussed in the following section.

Conclusions

The conclusions are discussed in light of the research questions: the role this learning community played in the students' transition to university life, the cross-cultural aspect of this learning community, and the students' perceptions of this learning community experience in general.

What role did this learning community play in the students' transition to university life?

Both the observations and students' comments during the focus groups suggest that this learning community experience helped the students in their transition to the university. Specifically, taking classes and living with the same student cohort were conducive to developing new friendships and caring relationships. These friendly relationships in their turn created a favorable environment for both social and academic help.

The U.S. students' perceptions of how the learning community helped in their transition differed from those of their international peers. For the former, the transition seemed to be considerably easier in comparison with the one the international learning community members experienced. Participation in the cross-cultural learning community put their transition into a different perspective for the U.S. students and consequently helped them cope with their transition issues better.

On the other hand, for the international students, the learning community meant an easier and faster introduction into the new culture. First, while the international students benefited from being in the community with other international students who were in a similar situation they had a firsthand opportunity to learn about the host culture by interacting with its representatives on a day-to-day basis. Second, the international students took an advantage of having a peer mentor who was an international student himself and could address their concerns well. Third, they had the learning community coordinators who understood where these students came from and the cross-cultural English section with the supportive teacher and assignments the international students could relate to. Finally, to certain extent, the host students were prepared to deal with people different than themselves and be accepting towards those differences.

Did the cross-cultural learning community enhance cross-cultural awareness and understanding?

One of the goals the learning community organizers sought to achieve was to enhance the students' cross-cultural awareness and understanding. The organizers provided numerous opportunities for the students to become more cross-culturally aware. First, the classes that the students took and the floor that they lived on consisted of almost equal proportions of

U.S. and international students. Second, one of the instructors was a woman of Greek origin. Third, the learning community coordinators invited international guest speakers to the learning community seminar. Fourth, the assignments, readings and videos in English 104 were selected with a purpose to expose the students to the cultural diversity both in the country and abroad. Last but by no means least, the students were encouraged to attend out-of-class activities and multicultural events: Iowa State International Opportunities Festival, a football game, the drama "The good times are killing me," and a concert of the Cajun music "Beau Soliel."

The students' perceptions of these cross-cultural opportunities were not neat and clean: often they were ambiguous. In fact, Whitt (1996) warns researchers about ambiguity when assessing student cultures and urges them to simply tolerate it.

On one hand, both the U.S. and international students expressed their disappointment with their cross-cultural experiences. The U.S. students were disappointed that the international students did not reveal much of their culture: they did not expect the international students to adapt so quickly whereas the international students were disappointed with the little interest the U.S. students expressed in their culture. As a result, both felt they could have had more interaction with other cultures and some students complained that they did not make many friends across cultures. The reasons for this situation, as they were perceived by the students, were a natural tendency to gravitate toward similar people, existing stereotypes, and the living arrangements (not everybody had a roommate from another culture).

On the other hand, the students' responses and the researcher's observations suggest that the cross-cultural learning community helped the students overcome their stereotypes as the interaction among the individuals from different cultures increased toward the end of the semester. Various group activities in the learning community seminar and English 104, assignments, readings and videos about different cultures and stereotypes in English 104, living on the floor with representatives of so many cultures helped the students overcome the stereotypes they had and consequently helped them become friends.

Although cross-cultural readings and assignments were helpful in enhancing cross-cultural awareness and understanding, the students realized that firsthand experiences with different cultures and people from these cultures are even more important in active understanding of different cultures. These firsthand experiences also helped the students see cultural differences in relativistic rather than dualistic terms.

Examples of firsthand experiences the learning community offered ranged from the students' living with people from other cultures and sharing the communal area, if not a room, to their collaborating with people from different cultures in their team projects. The latter, although sometimes seemed to be somewhat segmented, definitely helped the students move along a continuum from individualism to cooperation.

Finally, the exposure to different cultures, through interactions with their representatives and working on cross-cultural assignments, was conducive to the students' better understanding of their own culture. This exposure made the students realize that one culture is not necessarily better than another, and that culture and cultural differences are contextual and therefore not absolute. As a result of participation in the cross-cultural

learning community, the students became more open-minded about and less judgmental toward other cultures.

How did the students perceive this learning community experience in general?

Overall, the students felt that the learning community lived up to their expectations. The experience facilitated their transition by making the university feel smaller and more connected to them. The students met new people and made new friends through this learning community. Moreover, they learned about new cultures. While it appears that the international students benefited more from this experience in terms of transition, the U.S. students appear to have benefited more in terms of cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Even though the majority of students felt there was room for improvement in this learning community, they agreed that they would choose this learning community again and would recommend this experience to other students.

Discussion

In this section, the findings are discussed in light of the reviewed literature, which was divided in Chapter 2 into the literature discussing learning communities and cross-cultural education. In general, the findings support the reviewed literature in many ways.

Learning communities

A great number of the reviewed sources focus on the instruction-versus-learning paradigmatic shift occurring in higher education. The paradigmatic shift involves a range of changes towards social construction of knowledge, holistic and connected approach to learning, and cooperative learning culture. Learning communities were reported to respond to

and enhance these changes (Angelo, 1997; Bruffee, 1995; Bystrom, 1997). The cross-cultural learning community was also found to enhance some of these changes, such as the changes towards social construction of knowledge and cooperative learning culture.

Social construction of knowledge

Kenneth Bruffee (1995) argues that "We construct and maintain knowledge not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers" (p. 9). "Knowledge," he continues, "is not universal and absolute. It is local and historically changing. We construct it and reconstruct it, time after time, and build it up in layers" (p. 222).

What Bruffee, an English professor, says about creating knowledge is supported by what the researcher observed in writing workshops in the English class. First, the instructor strongly encouraged the student to "negotiate knowledge" by moving around the room and sharing their ideas and concerns, not only with her, but also with their fellow students. Second, in the writing process the idea of constructing and reconstructing knowledge and building it up in layers translates into writing drafts and constantly refining one's writing. For students who are used to seeing writing as a "one shot" activity, it presented a considerable challenge to understand the value of a good draft, or the value of writing more than one draft. Encouraging students to write drafts and incorporate the teacher's as well as their peers' feedback into their revisions was a good way to help them see writing as a gradual, complex and evolving process.

Cooperative learning culture

In his model of transforming the whole campus into a learning community, Angelo (1997) calls for a more cooperative academic culture. Students while at college need to learn how to work interdependently. Both faculty and student affairs professionals should help their students develop a new set of skills: team-oriented interpersonal skills, appreciation of different learning and working styles and ability to think "cross-functionally" (Bosley, 1991). One of the goals of the learning community was for the students to develop their teamwork skills. To achieve this goal, both the learning community coordinators and the English instructor designed a wide range of group activities. One of them, on learning styles, was described in detail in Chapter 4. Conducted at the beginning of the semester, this activity made the students aware of different learning styles. This awareness was helpful for the students in their team projects. The final team projects for the English class were most challenging as the students were assigned to groups that were heterogeneous not only in terms of learning styles, but also in terms of communication, problem-solving and working styles: the instructor put a lot of effort into designing as culturally diverse groups as possible. Working on the team projects in English 104 for many students was the first opportunity to cooperate "cross-functionally": to cooperate for such an extensive period of time and with individuals who potentially could be so much different.

In Angelo's (1997) "campuswide learning community," partnerships between academic and student affairs are very important (Banta & Kuh, 1998; Schroeder, Minor, & Tarkow, 1999). These partnerships, while creating a "seamless" learning environment, model the collaborative relationships in which students are expected to engage. The partnership

between the English instructor and the learning community coordinators provided a good example on collaboration for the students.

While this cross-cultural learning community supported the research concluding that learning communities enhance the shifts towards social construction of knowledge and cooperative learning culture in higher education, it did not seem to be cut out for enhancing the third shift discussed in the literature review section, that is a shift towards a holistic and connected approach to learning.

Holistic and connected approach to learning

The nature and cohesiveness of students' curricular experiences comes first on the Terenzini and Pascarella's (1997) list of factors of educational quality. In the same vein, Smith (1993) argues that learning should be built around interdisciplinary foci, rather than disconnected disciplines. Bystroom's (1997) number of colleges offering this type of learning experience, over 100, suggests that connecting disciplines is working. The idea is working because it helps students make connections and see the world holistically. Yet, for the ISU students involved in this learning community, connecting anthropology and English 104 was nothing more than a "confusing" experience. In the English 104 classroom, they were not able to draw many connections with the way how *Things Fall Apart* was interpreted and approached in their anthropology class. During the focus groups, some shared their frustration about their instructors' "criticizing each other" and "the anthropology teacher not liking the English teacher." Given that these were the students' perceptions, the learning community can be hardly defined in the way Goodsell-Love sees as the most common:

> [Learning community] center(s) on a vision of faculty and students—and sometimes administrators, staff and the larger community—working collaboratively toward

> shared, significant academic goals in environments in which competition, if not absent, is at least de-emphasized. In a learning community, both faculty and students have the opportunity and the responsibility to learn from and help teach each other. (Goodsell-Love as cited in Goodsell-Love, 1999, p.1)

Nor can it be defined as Gabelnick and his colleagues (1990) see it. According to them, learning communities

> … purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students.
> …learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team-teaching, and interdisciplinary themes. (p. 5)

Students' benefits from participation in the learning community

The reviewed literature suggests the following range of benefits from participating in learning communities:

- higher academic achievement and improved performance (Goodsell-Love, 1999; MacGregor, 1991; Tinto, 1997; Tokuno, 1993),
- better retention rates (Astin, 1993; MacGregor, 1991; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1994; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994; Tinto, 1997; Tokuno, 1993),
- greater satisfaction with college life (Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994),
- improved thinking (Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994)
- improved communication (Goodsell-Love, 1999)

- a greater ability to bridge the gap between the academic and social worlds (Angelo, 1997; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994).

While measuring academic achievement and performance and retention rates was not on the researcher's agenda, the students' greater satisfaction with their first semester at Iowa State is definitely a factor that could contribute to higher academic achievement and persistence. In addition, the students attributed the availability of study groups and academic help from their peers to their participation in the learning community. Likewise, the activities similar to the one in which the students engaged in the learning community seminar helped the students define their preferred learning style and strategies and consequently contributed to academic success.

Further, qualitative evidence on learning communities suggests that students find their teachers and peers more supportive, draw connections between their classes, and are more positive in general about the campus environment and their educational experiences (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). These are the factors Schlossberg and her colleagues (1995) deem as necessary for a successful transition: situation, self, support, and strategies.

Both observations and focus groups results supported this evidence in all of the aforementioned aspects, except one that deals with drawing connections between classes. The students' responses during the focus groups as well as observations indicated that the participation in the cross-cultural learning community made the students' first year at Iowa State University more interesting and educational. The students enjoyed the network and

support of their new friends; the international students especially reported support from the faculty, staff members and the peer mentor.

As far as linking the courses, which was supposed "to provide students and faculty with a vital sense of shared inquiry" (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 6), the students' perceptions about linking English and anthropology differed from those the research on effective learning communities reports. For instance, Barefoot, Fidler, Gardner, Moore and Roberts (1999) demonstrate the great potential of the linked courses in several learning communities for "creating the bonds across disciplines" (p. 84). Furthermore, they believe that "these bonds between student and student, between faculty and student, and between faculty in different disciplines can lift the educational experience to a new level of collaboration and cognitive development for all" (p. 84). Likewise, Elliot and Decker (1999) are convinced that "effective learning community work requires a strong sense of communalism, collaboration, and connected knowing—a marked contrast to the values of individualism, autonomy, and argument typically espoused by the academy" (p. 20).

Finally, the students' responses support most consistent positive findings around attitudinal and affective change in students (Cross, 1998). In the focus groups, the students reported changes in their attitudes towards individuals from different cultures. Further, providing the students with opportunities for affective development, the learning community bridged the academic-social divide that often plagues student life. In this cross-cultural learning community, the students had both in-class and out-of-class learning opportunities that they may not have if they were not in this learning community.

Cross-cultural education

As a result of participating in the cross-cultural learning community, the students developed some of the skills and capacities Ruben (1977) saw as critical in effective cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural skills and capacities

The students learned how to be nonjudgmental and empathetic and how to accept relativity of one's own knowledge and perceptions. The students made one considerable step towards the active understanding of cultural differences Sikema and Niyekawa (1987) called for. As Sikema and Niyekawa suggested, the students accomplished this step through non-traditional learning experiences where learning occurred both in and outside of the classroom and at both the cognitive and affective level.

All the cross-cultural skills the students learned are evolutionary and need to be developed further. For instance, the skill of accepting relativity of one's own knowledge and perceptions, which overlaps with a skill of being flexible, is a skill that needs constant fine-tuning. Once the U.S. students overcame their stereotypes about their international peers, they agreed that there were more similarities than differences among them and international students. However, Barna (1997), Bosley (1993) and Fine (1991) believe that in order to succeed in cross-cultural communication one should operate from the assumption of difference rather than similarity. The international students' responses during the focus groups supported this belief: they longed to let their American peers know about how different their culture was. At the same time, they wanted their cultural differences to be approached individually and contextually rather than stereotypically.

The fact that the international students resented the U.S. students' assumptions that they "live in a tree" or "take a ride to school on an elephant" emphasize the importance of relativists' approach to culture. Relativists, unlike universalists, believe that there are no cultural universals and cultural generalizations should be avoided (Barna, 1997; Bosley, 1993; Casse, 1981; Ferraro, 1994).

Cross-cultural learning community bridging cultural differences

A considerable body of the literature reviewed was devoted to cultural dyads: individualistic and collectivist, low-context and high-context, field independent and field sensitive, topic-centered and topic-associating, and low-tolerance and high tolerance for ambiguity cultures. A number of researchers deem the understanding of these dyads to be important in cross-cultural education. Hall (1976, 1983), Hofstede (1984), and Storti (1999) are among them. In the learning community seminar, the students were not only introduced to how cultures vary along the continuums of individualism and collectivism and low-context and high-context but were also provided with strategies for managing conflicts that may arise because of these variances.

The students, although for the most part unconsciously, were able to observe these differences. For instance, the way Yamikani described their team project—"It was like '*I* am going to do this' instead of '*WE* are going to do this'"—concurs with how Kim (1997), Ting-Toomey (1997), and Storti (1999) explain the difference between the more individualistic Western perspective emphasizing the importance of "I" identity and the more collectivistic Eastern perspective emphasizing the importance of "we" identity. Similarly, Bob, with his observation of the African Achebe's writing style, supported the argument made by Au

(1993) and Stefani (1997) that certain cultures (e.g., African American) prefer topic-associating communication styles. Unlike topic-centered linear Euro-American culture, they use "a series of episodes linked to some person or theme. These links are implicit in their account and are generally left unstated" (Au, 1993, p. 96). Achebe's story is multi-layered; the English instructor likened reading the story to peeling off the onion. Bob described it as "more relaxed than most American novels," as the one containing "more offshoots" and "less important information."

Although the dimensions of culture: individualism and collectivism, low context and high context, field independence and field sensitivity, topic centeredness and topic associatedness, and low tolerance and high tolerance for ambiguity may seem to be in dichotomous relationships, they should be approached as continuums or even better as a full-fledged spectrum of what culture can mean. Young Yun Kim (1997) calls for an integration of these cultural dyads into "intercultural personhood." The cross-cultural learning community is an excellent example of this integration as it "projects a kind of human development that is open to growth—growth beyond the perimeters of one's own cultural upbringing" (Kim, 1997, p. 434).

Implications for Practice and Suggestions for Research

The implications and recommendations for practice, including some students' recommendations on how the given learning community can be improved, are as follows:

- Most of the learning communities are targeted at first-year students, probably because such communities create supportive environments for entering students. Yet there

should be no limits to the availability of learning communities to all students regardless of their class standing.

- Learning communities should offer more collaborative opportunities for participating students. When conducting group activities, faculty and student affairs professionals should be clear about their expectations and learning outcomes for students. If an activity is designed to illustrate the negative aspect of competition, its organizers should plan it carefully to ensure that students understand what was intended, rather than learning different strategies for competition as was the case in the learning community seminar.
- When linking classes, teacher partnerships should be designed in a way that showcases cooperation and collaboration among faculty and allows students to draw connections between disciplines.
- Cross-cultural learning communities with English as one of its components should be encouraged. In spite of certain criticism voiced by the American students, English is a good match for a cross-cultural learning community. English as a part of a cross-cultural learning community lends itself very well to Bruffee's notion of "constructing and negotiating knowledge" and realizing that "knowledge is not universal and absolute" (p. 222). It can give students exposure to a "variety of distinct languages of understanding" (Oakeshott & Fuller, 1989, p. 39), interpreting the truth and constructing knowledge. It can teach students to see the world as a diverse but at the same time interdependent community.

- While cross-cultural English in a learning community definitely would be beneficial for freshmen, more senior students aspiring for careers in the international workforce should be strongly encouraged to participate in a cross-cultural learning experience. As of today, there is only one cross-cultural learning community on the ISU campus where both undergraduate international and U.S. students are enrolled. There is a need, therefore, for expanding cross-cultural learning opportunities on the ISU campus for both lower and upper level students, especially in majors where cross-cultural awareness is necessary.
- To ensure cross-cultural learning not only in the classroom but also outside of the classroom, an effort should be made to provide willing students with international roommates and develop out-of-class activities where students could learn more about other people's cultures.

The aforementioned implications and recommendations can be successful only if appropriate studies are conducted to determine the extent to which they are successful. The following are suggestions for research on learning communities and cross-cultural education:

- While the literature on the conceptual framework for learning communities is abundant, very little is done to explain the mechanics of organizing learning communities: recruiting of interested students, providing living arrangements, and avoiding potential pitfalls in learning communities. Therefore, more research should be conducted in this venue.
- The lack of literature on cross-cultural learning communities and their benefits may explain why there are so few of them on U.S. campuses. The availability of relevant

research on cross-cultural education, especially on how practitioners can make this learning experience equally challenging for both U.S. and international students, could change this situation.

- More research should be conducted on partnerships among faculty and student affairs professionals in learning communities. Knowing more about faculty attitudes towards learning communities can help learning communities' organizers create a seamless learning environment for students.
- Investigating how an institutional culture and mission affect learning communities and faculty attitudes towards learning communities could be helpful in customizing learning communities to a specific campus. Understanding how a departmental culture, especially the importance a department attaches to grades, influences the success of a learning community is another avenue for further research.

Academic practitioners need to realize that cross-cultural education is a growing field that has many common denominators with the Peace Corps, military agencies, Foreign Service establishments, international development agencies, multinational business corporations, and even travel agencies. When implementing cross-cultural learning communities, practitioners should draw on experiences and research in these areas.

APPENDIX A:

FOCUS GROUPS PROTOCOL

Focus group #1
LC members, international students
Expected N of participants – 5
Place: G84 (Den),
Linden/Devitt House
Time: 6.00pm-7.30pm
Date: February 17, 2000

Focus group #2
LC members, U.S. students
Expected N of participants – 6
Place: G84 (Den),
Linden/Devitt House
Time: 6.00pm-7.30p.m.
Date: February 29, 2000

Note: Questions in brackets are additional, probing questions.
LC – learning community; CCLC – cross-cultural learning community

I. Introduction

A. Having snacks
B. Explaining why I'm doing this project and ground rules
C. Having the students choose their pseudonyms

Introductory questions:

1. Why did you choose this CCLC? What were your expectations? What did you think it would do to you?
2. Was the LC what you expected? In what ways was it? In what ways was it not?

II. Students' perceptions of the role of the learning community in their transition to university life

1. For all of you, it was the first semester here at ISU, right? ***What role did it play in your transition to the university life?***
2. What did it mean to you to take three classes with the same cohort (group) of students? (if they don't touch upon that answering q1)
3. You live in the same residence hall and on the same floor; is your floor any different from other floors in the house?

4. Are your relationships with students from the LC different in any way from those with other students? In what ways?
5. Do you help each other? Can you think of examples of this help? (Academic, miscellaneous, other)
   - Who do you turn for help most? (LC member or non-LC member; American or international students?)
   - Who do you offer most help to? (LC member or non-LC member; American or international students?)
6. Many of you were involved in some out-of-class activities with this LC? What do you think of them?
   (Which activity was your favorite? Why?)
8. You have a peer mentor Ayaz in your LC. What role did he play in your transition to the university? (Did the fact that he's an international student himself make any difference to you?)
9. How did you find the faculty and staff members involved in this LC? Did you notice any differences between them and other faculty and staff members?

III. Academics

1. ***Do you think the participation in this LC had any impact on your studies? In what ways?***
2. Let's back up a little, and go back to August 1999, when English 104, the class with students from seven different countries, started. How did you feel about the fact that there were other students who were non-native speakers of English, your instructor was a non-native speaker herself? (Did it help in any way? Or would you have preferred to be in class with American students only?)
3. What do you think of the idea of linking three courses together? How does that differ from taking separate classes? (Did you draw any connections between them? What were they?)
4. Did the fact that you were assigned the same book for reading in two classes: English 104 and Anthropology 201 make any difference?
5. How do you feel about your writing after taking English 104?

4. In English 104, you had a several writing workshops, and I noticed many of you preferred to write on your own, in fact, the instructor had a difficulty convincing you to work with your peers. Can you explain why?
5. In this learning community, did you have a chance to learn from somebody else other than your instructors? (Like your peers, for instance? Do you think you can potentially learn from other students?)

IV. Cross-cultural component

1. So, you all knew it's going to be a CCLC, right? Let's talk about the cross-cultural aspect of this LC. I counted the number of cultures represented in this LC; do you know how many I counted? More than 14! Your classmates, your floormates, one of your instructors, some of your guest speakers in LC seminar, your peer mentor – they were all people from different countries. For how many of you it was the first experience with representatives of so many different cultures? ***How can you describe this experience? What did it mean to you?***
2. How did you perceive American/international students before this experience? (Did you have any stereotypes, good or bad? What were they?)
3. What do you think about them now? Did your perceptions change? Which of them? In what ways? Why?
4. In other classes, outside of this LC, you meet and interact with American/international students; do these interactions differ from those with American students from your LC? In what ways? Who do you feel more comfortable with? Why?
5. What did you think of the readings or videos in your English 104 class? There are many sections of English 104; not all of them represent cultural perspectives other than American. How useful did you find all those multicultural readings and videos? Or did you wish they had represented more American culture? Why?
6. Did participation in this LC help you understand the host culture/other cultures? How?
7. Did you find more differences or similarities between your own culture and the host culture? Can you think of examples illustrating those differences and similarities?
8. Through this LC, did you make new friends from the host culture/other cultures? At ISU, do you have more American or international friends now? Can you explain why?

9. In this LC, what helped you understand the meaning of culture most?
10. We talked about cultural differences. How did you feel about those differences initially? (Inferior? Superior? Upset? Other reactions?) How do you feel about them now? Same? Different?
11. Do you think you can learn anything from people different than yourself? Did participation in this LC affect your thinking about different cultures and people from different cultures? How?

V. Teamwork

1. ***At the end of the semester you presented team projects. Let's talk about them. What do you think of them?*** (Were they fun? Why? Why not? What was good about projects? What was not so good about the projects?)
2. If you had had this project at the beginning of seminar, do you think the outcome would have been different? In what ways?
3. Did you have any conflicts in your team? What were they? What caused them?
4. How equally were the responsibilities shared?
   (Do you think everyone participated equally? Did you try to ensure equal participation? How did you do that?)
5. What did you have more difficulty with: involving other people or getting involved? Reasons why?
6. Who took the central role in your project? (International or American students? LC members or non-LC members?) Why do you think it happened?
7. Were there any individuals in your teams that behaved differently from what you expected? Can you explain why? (Was it due to different cultural background or any other reasons?)
8. Do you think team projects like this one are useful? Why? Why not? If you were to do a similar project again, what would you do differently?
9. How often do you have to engage in similar team projects in other classes? Do they differ from the one in this class? How?
10. Remember in one of your LC seminars you had a guest speaker who asked you to do a short group activity with pulling some color paper? Winners were those who ended up

with the biggest chunk of paper. Those who had little paper or no paper at all lost. Looking back at this activity, do you see any connections between this activity and the team project you were involved in English 104?

11. Would you have been able to perform the project on your own? (What did it take for you to put the project together?)

VI. Concluding questions

1. In September in a LC seminar you did an activity on different learning styles, remember? What did you think of it? Why do you think Jane and Jane decided to conduct this activity at the beginning of the semester?
2. Did you think of any possible benefits of the experience in this CCLC in your future career?
3. Do you feel you changed in any way through participation in this learning community? In what ways?
4. Now looking back are you glad you were part of this learning community? Why?
   If you were given a chance to go back to August '99, would you choose this learning community again? Why? Why not? (What would you like to be different in the LC this time?)
5. Would you recommend LC to other students? How would you convince them that it's a worthwhile experience?

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